# BOUND TO HAPPEN

ELSWYTH THANE

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## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

RIDERS OF THE WIND
CLOTH OF GOLD
HIS ELIZABETH
ECHO ANSWERS
BOUND TO HAPPEN

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*by*

ELSWYTH THANE

*Author of*

"Riders of the Wind," "Cloth of Gold," etc.

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BOUND TO HAPPEN

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by
Elswyth Thane

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Made in the United States of America

*To*

HIS EXCELLENCY

LIEUTENANT-GENERAL SIR LOUIS J. BOLS

K.C.B., K.C.M.G., D.S.O.,

GOVERNOR AND COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF BERMUDA

AND

LADY BOLS

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# *Bound to Happen*

## PART ONE

### MORNING AT THE GRANGE

# I

IT looked like a simple enough day to start with.

A sunny sort of Kentish morning it was, which is not as unusual in England as some people pretend to suppose; busy birds in the garden; roses just beginning to show what they could do; hop-vines still a thin, tender green. There had been hundreds of just such mornings in the pleasant life of Charles Gordon, M. P., forty-odd, Conservative, and sufficiently far from the title to be free of care. Subconsciously, he looked forward to hundreds more.

We find him writing a letter, alone in the bright morning-room of the Grange, with the long windows open on the lawn and a glimpse of warm red brick beyond, and regiments of blue delphinium spikes—a slim, quiet man with a round, boyish head and a singularly sweet-tempered mouth. A shaft of sunlight lay across the paper, and his pen moved briskly through it, for there was no thriftiness

in his cheerful soul, and he hoarded neither his eyesight nor his income. Both were excellent, and he had always a healthy innocence of apprehensions.

Higgins, who had apparently served generations of Gordons for their own good, came in with the morning post, which he placed conveniently on the writing-table and turned his attention to the curtains. Charles glanced without interest at the outside of the top letter, and went on writing.

"What are you doing, Higgins? I don't want that window closed."

"No, sir," agreed Higgins pacifically. "It's the sun, sir."

"But it's quite all right, I say. Leave it alone."

Higgins had learned long ago that there were times when it became necessary to take these Gordons in hand.

"You can't sit there writing with the sun glaring down on your paper, sir. Ruin your eyes in no time and give you a headache, this early in the day."

"I'm not subject to headaches," Charles remarked, mildly argumentative, "at any time of day."

"No, sir," agreed Higgins, and worked his

will upon the curtains. "Now, was there anything else, sir?"

"That's all, thank you," said Charles, sweetly, and Higgins withdrew.

Charles sealed the letter with satisfaction, enclosing a cheque, and carried it toward the great doors which Higgins had closed behind him; heavy, carven doors of ancient oak, on the other side of which lay the Tudor Hall of that Kentish manor house, famous for its minstrel's gallery and its armor—and on the other side of it, too, this morning, waited that turning point which is bound to occur in the most regular lives.

He laid his hand on the knob, and as he did so the door was opened inward upon him. He stood face to face, unprepared, with Nancy, whose hand rested still on the outer handle of the door. They stopped there, startled, confused, each holding the door, each barring the way to the other.

They had both known in some dim, subconscious corner of themselves that they were falling in love with one another, but this was the first time they had faced it simultaneously. Nancy looked a little frightened, but her eyes were reckless. To Charles the situation was both fascinating and embarrassing. He would

have preferred time to collect himself. But here they were.

"Hullo," she said, standing still.

"Hullo," he replied, rooted.

They looked at one another helplessly.

He noticed again how young she was—brown-haired, grey-eyed, thin, and young—wearing the exact blue of his delphiniums. He could remember her riding a horse much too big for her, when she was nine—brown-haired then too, grey-eyed, and thin. She hadn't changed. . . .

She noticed again how kind he looked, how quietly humorous, with a gentle mouth. She could remember him holding a steadying hand for her to mount her big mare, that summer when she was nine, treating her like a lady grown, to her enormous pride, smiling up at her in the saddle—slim, with the sun on his dark hair. She was nineteen now—but he hadn't changed. . . .

"Were you going out?" she said oddly into the silence, for somebody had to say something, sooner or later.

"Only to put a letter in the post." He showed it her, in his hand.

Still they looked at one another, one either side of the tall door.

More than ten years they had been friends, coming and going intimately like this, in one another's lives; more than ten years approaching this moment, this sudden opening of a door. . . .

Their hands met somehow, round the latch, and she went blindly into his arms for a kiss.

It lasted a long time, their first. They were rather defiant about it, as if daring life to do its worst when they had finished. And it ended with a quick glance of mutual guilt at the open door behind her.

Charles closed the door and stood with his back against it, watching her. But it was as if he shut something in with them, safe, forever theirs, rather than a barring out of the world.

"That was bound to happen."

His voice sounded strange in the stillness which hung about her.

"I hoped it would!" said young Nancy, defying life.

He smiled, less at the words than at some dearness of hers for saying them.

"Well—" he smiled, "where do we go from here?"

"I don't know." Her eyes rested on him, reckless, very shining. "Does it matter?"

"It does to me," he stated seriously.

"Oh, Charles, *darling,* I didn't mean——"

"I know what you meant, my dear. It was unreasonable of me to ask you that—yet."

"It's harder for you, I know."

But as she turned grave, he smiled again irresistibly.

"Much the easiest thing I've ever done," he assured her.

She loved him for that. He came away from the door—his arm around her, they moved to the chesterfield and sat down, contemplating one another rather helplessly still, but with a queer sort of fatalistic humor. He seemed not to know quite what to do with the trusting hands he held.

"Did you—get some tennis?" he asked at last, for somebody had to say something.

"Only one game."

She was waiting on his mood, with reckless eyes. She knew that he was talking against words, as it were, blocking with commonplaces the intricacies they must eventually speak. She knew that for once in his life Charles was funking it, and half amused, half pitying, she let him have his way. While at the back of everything there stirred a frank envy of Other People—people who could kiss one another

and then freely set a Day. Whereas she and Charles. . . .

"I suppose poor old Johnny proposed to you again," he was saying.

"Yes," she sighed. (For Johnny things were so simple.)

"And you refused him again." It was by no means an interrogation. He knew.

"Yes."

"How sensible you are!" he said admiringly.

"Charles." She looked down at their interlaced fingers, all white at the knuckles with strain, the only visible sign of tension.

"Nancy? What an adorable name you've got!"

"It's Anne, really," she remarked at a tangent. "Haven't you got a little name? Doesn't anybody ever call you anything but Charles?"

"Nothing printable," he regretted.

"That comes of being an orphan, I suppose."

"'Oh, men of dark and dismal fate,'"

murmured Charles musically,

"'Forgo your cruel employ,
Have pity on my lonely state,
I am an orphan boy!'"

"'*Poor fel-low'!*" crooned Nancy promptly, to his joy, for he had taught her her Gilbert in days gone by.

His fingers tightened on hers, jealously. All this dearness, all this readiness for footling digression, all this glorious fund of foolishness while something ached somewhere on the rim of consciousness—it all belonged to him. He had known her so long, loved her so long, sometimes it almost seemed that he had himself invented her for his own comfort and delight. And now. . . .

"Nancy, I can never let you go back to Town tomorrow! When I think of the time we've lost—the things we might be saying to each other—the silly things I want to know about you——"

"And the questions I want to ask!" she cried. "For a person with such millions of friends, you've managed a weird detachment, Charles. You seem so—solitary. Why is that?"

And why is it, this craving to *know,* this jealous tugging at the decent veil of wholesome human reticence, this loving prying, which seizes upon even the sanest people when they fall in love? Why this hasty intolerance

of the very mystery which has wrought the magic which in turn seeks to destroy it?

A Wisdom truly divine has ordained—in the Occidental world at least, where both sexes are accustomed to think for themselves—that one mind can never quite enter into another. In this way, and perhaps in no other, can society continue to thrive. The eternal hope springs in the human breast that by judicious questioning, and endless worry, and consuming love, one can ultimately comprehend to one's satisfaction the words and actions of some idolized fellow creature. This it is, and possibly only this—a sort of sublimated curiosity, by no means idle—that makes the world go round.

"That is a question which calls for an epigram," said Charles lightly, "and I can't think of one just now."

"Oh, well—" She sighed philosophically, and left it there. "Hasn't this been a *nice* house-party, Charles! Absolutely one of the best."

"Too many people. There are always too many people at house-parties. That is called propriety. What the world needs is less—propriety."

"Hear, hear!" clamored Nancy softly.

"I want to be alone with you!" His voice dropped to real gravity. "No, I mean actually alone—not like this, with somebody popping in the door any minute."

"You mean without a house-party!"

"But I had to have this one, to get you here at all, didn't I?"

"It's one of those vicious circles that go on forever."

"It can't go on," he said, very low.

She lifted to him that shining grey gaze.

"Don't let's let it," she whispered.

"You mean—" Her eyes did not waver, but he gave it up at once. "No, you don't."

"I don't suppose I do."

But she sighed.

The waiting intricacies welled up between them again, cutting them off from speech, and even from each other; things that had to be coped with, finally; things they had simultaneously forgotten, for that moment at the door. Disastrous things, in the middle distance.

Looming even larger, because of its imminence, was her departure to Town the next day, when the house-party broke up. They had often been separated before, of course, in all that long time since she was nine—days,

weeks, sometimes months, had come between them, again and again. But now. . . .

Now time was more precious.

He rose, and paced fretfully across the room, lighting a cigarette. She watched him with a somewhat fatalistic composure for one so young, waiting for whatever he might say next, very much in his hands.

"Is that woman's beastly motor trip actually coming off?" he demanded suddenly, off down another byway.

"We start next Monday."

"Why? What for? What is there in it for you?"

"It will improve my mind," she told him, grinning. "Mrs. Martin intends to see cathedral towns in a big way."

"But why lug you into that? There's nothing wrong with your mind, I like it now—more or less in its natural state. Whoever suggested your going with her?"

"Mummy suggested it, if you must know."

That checked him.

"Your mother is a darling. I suppose if she hadn't been so much like a rather severe elder sister I should have fallen in love with her long before you were born. In fact, I've often wondered why I never did."

She made no answer to that.

Better for her if you had, she was thinking, passionately defensive of her mother's happiness as she must be, now that there was so little of it; bitter, for her age, toward the fading memory of the nerve-shattered, temperish man who had fathered her and wrecked her mother's health with his bad times, till finally he died, and left them in exhausted peace.

Her lips twisted as she brooded, sitting quietly on the chesterfield. Better if you had, Charles—and Mummy would be contented and cared for now, instead of——

"But of course that might have been awkward for you and me," he was suggesting whimsically, very low, and they laughed together, surprised, and dimly shocked, and a bit shaky with emotion. "But why should Lillian let you in for this Mrs. Martin business, that's what I want to know," he reverted then.

"You've asked me, and I'll tell you. Mummy's illness has been very expensive. Mrs. Martin has tactfully offered me quite a lot of money if I'll go along and read the guide-book to her."

"Good Lord." He stood appalled, taking it in in all its pitiful significance. "You mean

you're to go with that dreadful woman as a sort of paid companion?"

"Why not? Don't be old-fashioned, Charles. And you've got no right to say dreadful, you've never met her."

"I don't want to meet her," he argued unreasonably, and took a turn round the room, adjusting himself to this new idea. "You mean you and Lillian actually need—money? Are things as bad as that?"

"Pretty bad."

"But I had no idea, I—I—something must be done! Nancy, can't I——"

"No."

"No, I suppose not," thoughtfully. "But now it's you that's being old-fashioned."

"I don't mind going with Mrs. Martin, truly. I like motoring, and I shall learn a lot—out of the guide-book, you know!—besides travelling is a luxury to which I have always longed to be accustomed! It isn't as though I were going as lady's maid, Charles! Mummy and I haven't come to that yet. I shan't have to sit in front with the chauffeur! Though I've noticed that chauffeurs usually look very nice indeed. Your Rogers, for instance."

"My Rogers wasn't engaged just to look nice," he objected, in foolish parentheses.

"I know—it's just a gift!"

"I only hope Mrs. Martin's man is as good a mechanic!"

"I haven't seen him yet. He's a lottery. He comes with the car."

"A hired car?"

"From an agency. Don't wince like that, plutocrat. One can get beautiful cars from agencies. And smart chauffeurs to drive them, in lovely liveries."

"Not such a bad job, at that, I should think," he veered unexpectedly again. "Driving you about England in weather like this, even with a demon chaperone. Why couldn't I have been born a chauffeur!"

It is moments like this that the Recording Angel is waiting for.

Restless in his sunny room, the beloved delphiniums marching up and down in their blue regiments outside—he grieved his gardeners by demanding delphiniums practically everywhere—quixotically, he wished himself a chauffeur, and presto! the time was to come very soon when they would both look back on those few words of his, spoken so thoughtlessly; and looking back, would wonder at the

fatal ease with which a man's destiny can swerve.

"If you wore a claret-colored livery with brass buttons, like Rogers," she speculated, "I'm not sure I wouldn't fall in love with you."

"Silver buttons," he corrected. "Rogers would consider brass ones vulgar."

"Does he ever smile?"

"Look here, shall I make you a present of him?"

"Jealous," she murmured happily.

"Granted! Why couldn't I come along on your rotten tour and be the chauffeur? I'd look almost as well as Rogers, don't you think?" He surveyed his ramshackle country tweeds with a complacent eye.

"Charles—idiot!"

She was laughing at him as wholeheartedly as though they had nothing else to think of but this new absurdity of his. She loved him like this, loved his inconsequent, gay moods, his apparently incurably frivolous mind hiding behind the shy formality of his manner in public. He was a great man, or would be, very soon—one of the few real statesmen of the post-war decade, one of the steadiest fingers on the worrisome pulse of the world, with a

headline name and a voice which had beguiled the House of Commons like sheep from point to point many times over. Yet he stood there before her now, slim and persuasive in a disreputable coat with pipe-bulged pockets, advocating imbecile impossibilities. She adored him, she always had, he was dear and kind and never had rages, and there had been little enough to laugh at, ever in her crowded life. . . .

"I'm not an idiot," he was protesting with hurt dignity, more than half serious. "I'm a safe, considerate, and experienced driver. We could take the new Daimler—now I know why I bought it! There would surely be moments along the way that we could snatch for our own. We could make her take naps, or something, and nip off together."

"But, Charles, you're quite crazy—M.P.'s don't do such things!"

"M.P.'s be blowed! Let's both go into service and have a lark!"

"But she wants to start on Monday, and take about three weeks——"

"Well, the House is rising for Whitsun. I've nothing in the world to do."

"But Canterbury is first on the list, and you

can't go to Canterbury as a chauffeur, it's not two hours from here!"

"I haven't been in Canterbury Cathedral since I was a boy. That's shocking."

"Charles! This has gone far enough! Besides—" She stopped, unhappily.

"Well?" he queried with defiance. But he knew it had to come, now.

"Well!" She spread her hands in a gesture of finality.

He caught them in his, and sat beside her during a moment's rebellious silence, wrestling with his fate. They were terribly in earnest now, as only the naturally lighthearted can be. All this talk and laughter and nonsense, so genuine, so precious to them both—it had served only to postpone the things that must be said at last.

"My dear—what are we going to do about this!" And he put a kiss in her palm.

"Charles, I—" She recovered her hands, firmly. "This never happened. Promise me that none of it ever happened."

"That's impossible."

"Everything else is impossible. We must just pretend at luncheon that I haven't seen you since breakfast."

"It will only happen again, you know."

"Then you shut me out of your life entirely. When I leave here tomorrow I can never come back."

"That's melodrama."

"No, just commonsense."

"Well, anyway, whatever you like to call it, it won't do. Please listen to me, Nancy, and get this thing straight once and for all. I have been married for fourteen years, and——"

"Oh, don't talk like that!" She rose with an unsteady laugh and paced away from him nervously. "It's the sort of thing they say in bad plays! The next line is always something about your wife never having understood you!"

"Well, no, she hasn't," he admitted composedly. "But this time I was going to say something quite different. I——"

"Why do so many intelligent men marry women who don't understand them?" she cried, voicing a question which has vexed the ages.

"Sheer carelessness," hazarded Charles, standing where she had left him. "But what I was going to say——"

"No, don't." She covered her ears. "That's torn it. I'm sorry, Charles."

"Sorry?" He looked stricken.

"I'm terribly, terribly sorry." She came to him frankly, and stood looking up into his face, almost touching him, while he looked back at her gravely, withholding his hands. "I thought I could face up to it. When you kissed me just now I thought I didn't care what happened next. But hang it all, Cicely's always been decent to me. I had no business to keep on coming here after we—after I—oh, I'm sorry it happened, I shouldn't have risked this house-party with Cicely away, I might have known, I should have just bowed myself out of your life after I began to fall in love with you, but I——"

"Are you apologizing to me because I kissed you?"

"Yes, I am." She was able to smile. "It was my fault, I—wanted you to."

"But—" He stopped, with a small gesture of inarticulacy.

"Oh, yes, we may try to think Cicely wouldn't mind if she knew—but she would mind, awfully. It would hit her pride, at least. And——"

"But don't you see——"

"And what I hate worst about it is that if she came home and walked in that door now, she would expect me to put my arms round her

and kiss her as we've always done—she'd kiss me—and I'd feel a rotten cad. I——"

"But you're forgetting——"

"I'm not forgetting anything! But I should have kept away from you, I've tried to, but you're so—necessary. And you seemed so hurt and lonely, though I tried to hope you wouldn't notice—I want you always to have everything you want, Charles, and you seemed to want me, so I kept on coming—again—and again—I——"

"But you're saying all the things I ought to be saying, which leaves me looking such an ass," he objected patiently. "Technically I have a wife, yes—and I've been making love to you. But I'm *not* sorry, and I'd do it again tomorrow. What do you think of that?"

"I suppose I ought to hate you."

"I suppose you ought."

He stood there, very close, very patient, waiting, till suddenly she was in his arms again. . . .

"Oh, Charles, I did try—" She was half laughing, half crying, as she drew away.

"Do you suppose I haven't tried?"

There was more behind that than she could know. The loss of his peace of mind, the ache of an old void, the unwelcome heat of a new

flame, the collapse of his careful régime, founded on tact and philosophy and a great doing without.

For years he had lived sanely, wisely, busily, the pleasant life he had built for himself. And now she had come round the edge of that opening door, with her quick mouth and reckless eyes, and it was all undone. They could never go back to the old way now. And there was no more peace for him. But it was bound to happen.

"You interrupted me a minute ago," he went on slowly, and turned away from her, speaking with a cold deliberation, for the sake of self-control. "I was about to say—I have been married for fourteen years, and ever since I can remember, Cicely and I have welcomed every excuse, however flimsy, for seeing as little as possible of one another."

## II

"BUT, Charles——"

The words hung there unhappily. It seemed that she could never go on. He glanced over his shoulder at her—her head was bent.

"What were you going to say?"

"Well—it's only—I realized that, of course, but—you *have* concealed it pretty well, haven't you!"

"All part of being an M.P.!" he smiled wryly. "And Cicely is a sportsman."

"But *why,* Charles—why should things be like this with you and Cicely?"

"Why not?" countered Charles, with a flippancy he did not feel.

"In the first place nobody would believe what you've just said. You and Cicely are notorious for being happily married on a *laissez faire* basis. I know you're not. At least I— But I don't understand."

"Nor do I, as a matter of fact," he admitted seriously. "Why do people dislike one

another, I don't know? Suppose she were a musician, and I was tone deaf. Or suppose I was an artist and she was color blind. We've nothing—nothing at all. But don't ask me why, because there's no answer!"

"Then how has this tremendous fable of your ideal marriage survived?"

"Well, after all, Cicely and I don't ignore one another in public nor throw things at one another in private!"

"Seriously, please!"

"It is possible to remember one's manners, even in marriage," he moralized outrageously.

"You're saying that I haven't the right to know what's wrong between you and Cicely." She met his evasions quietly.

"Nancy—my darling. People have strange prejudices," he began in his gentle voice, from across the room. "I would confide in you about my bank account, or my religion, or let you open my letters, without a qualm. But I'm not going to discuss Cicely with you any more. There's nothing wrong—nothing right. She lives here now and then, often enough to keep up appearances—and also, I think, because she happens to like it."

"But she does like it—she's supposed to adore this house."

"We both do. Sometimes I think it's held us together as no child could have done." His eyes swept the happy, gracious room with affection. So high, so cool, so exquisitely proportioned—one of the last strongholds against the twin evils, auctioneer and profiteer—its priceless panelling positively glowed in the morning light. "There is some truth in the worn out joke about her having married me in order to live here. Within these respectable walls we drift along very politely, I assure you. And please don't let's say any more about that part of it."

"It's not—just me, then," she said, relieved.

"Don't flatter yourself, my dear. Cicely and I had finished long before you were out of the schoolroom. Which reminds me, Nancy, I'm too old for this sort of thing. And you're too young. We're both crazy. Where are you going?—" She had started resolutely for the door. "—What have I said now? Please don't be angry——"

"When you call it 'this sort of thing' and talk about ages—I give up, that's all!"

"But you know better than that."

Quiet as the words were, they stopped her. Her hands went out, but fell far short of him.

They stood there, half the long room between them, staring across the gulf.

"Charles, what on earth can we do? I adore you, I have ever since I was a baby and you and Mummy were friends. *He* was jealous of you—he used to make dreadful scenes after you had gone—you must have known that—I suppose that's why you never came very often. Why did you come at all, Charles? We weren't a very cheerful lot. Was it Mummy —then?"

He took that squarely, faced it honestly as it was meant—this unevasive girl who wanted to know, so calmly, if ever he had loved her mother!

Then why had he gone back again and again to that gloomy house, dominated by its temperish invalid, shadowed by its dull daily dread of his ultimate insanity? Lillian was a dear—gallant and uncomplaining—she had been terribly in love with the poor devil before the War had shattered him utterly. Children of long friendly families, Charles and Lillian and her dead brother had been playmates—but she had always loved the other fellow—Charles had never minded that, he had never dreamed of Lillian, much as he looked up to her—she was more than a year

older—she had used to smack him down, when they were children—he was fond of her, she was one of the landmarks of his life, like a sister—but even without that other fellow, so early an established factor, would he ever have got round to the idea of marrying her?

He thought not.

Why had he kept in touch with that exhausting, tragic place, then, returning time after time to unsatisfactory luncheons, or teas in the garden, watched by the silent, brooding figure in its impending madness—watched too by a thin, grey-eyed child? Nancy, handing his cup, sitting on the grass at his feet, looking down at him from the back of her big mare—he was never allowed to present her with a proper mount—Nancy, even then?

Preposterous.

"No," he said slowly, honestly, worrying at it. "It was never Lillian."

"Were you just—sorry for us, or what?"

"My dear girl, I don't know, I'm sure, why I came. I'm devoted to Lillian in a queer, eternal sort of way, as you know. And I've always been—awfully fond of you."

"You never used to take much notice of me, Charles."

"No," he admitted, looking at her thought-

fully from across the room and down the years. "No, I don't remember that I did. But—you were always there, weren't you. You—liked me to come?"

She gave a little choking laugh.

"Words, Charles, words! *'Fond of me'—'liked you to come!'* Don't you know, couldn't you see, no other man created in God's image has ever mattered to me but you? I suppose at first it was because you were all the things *he* wasn't. And then it was just because you were Charles. And now—oh, what's the good of talking like this?"

"Just one minute—please. You mean—" He struggled visibly with the idea. "You mean you've been—thinking of me—a long time?"

"I keep telling you, Charles, I've never thought of much else! I had your picture at school with me, did you know that? I told them you were my favorite uncle—I felt that way about you then! It wasn't until—later—that your marriage to Cicely began to be my tragedy." She hesitated, embarrassed, and then plunged on. "I suppose I'm sounding young and dismal and romantic, but I don't mean to. I'm only saying that this wasn't an accident just now, and it isn't something that

will blow over. I'd promised myself I'd play fair, but—it's difficult. You see, I never had crushes like other girls. There was always you. I'll never be satisfied with nice boys like Johnny. There will always be you."

He stood silent for a moment when she had finished, as though mesmerized by her honesty and young abandon. It is not given to every man to hear, so fearlessly told, that he is God. And to Charles, who had lived so long in his own pocket, it was dazzling news. He could not manage it at all.

"I seem to have robbed you of a good deal of fun, one way and another," he said then. "And it occurs to me again that Johnny is the logical person for you."

"Oh, if you're harking back to all that 'youth to youth' rot the Victorian novelists harped on——!"

"I'm afraid it goes a long way beyond the Victorians, you know."

She looked at him despairingly. How to explain to him in cold blood like this that Johnny's very youngness, all nerves and agonies and tender places, forever hurting and getting hurt, was driving her inevitably to the shelter of his own seasoned nature? Between her two invalids, she had had enough of nerves

and domestic tempests and the unending necessity for tact. She possessed perhaps more than her share of humanity's morbid craving to be understood—to be, at least borne with. She wanted her own moods humored and indulged sometimes—she wanted cradling, as only Charles knew how. With the unimaginable comfort of Charles' kiss still warm in her blood, Johnny's stammering adoration, so clumsy and so demanding, seemed pitiably futile. Youth! She could not remember Charles as young as Johnny. And it was Charles she wanted, with the myopic simplicity of an honest soul.

"Charles, how can you be so stupid? Don't you know that even if you weren't the great Charles Gordon, M.P., not even Johnny could compete with you? It isn't the things you've done, and may still do—it isn't your lovely house, or your way with a dog, or your seat on a hunter—it's just the funny way your soul is hung together, that I love!"

"I see," he said, untruthfully, and grinned, because the great Charles Gordon was one thing he had never learned to take seriously.

"And please don't think I'm complaining because you're all I care about in the world, besides Mummy. I'm used to that. I rather

like it. It simplifies things." She grinned too, bravely.

"I wish I could say things the way you can," he remarked then, still struggling with matters beyond his articulation; he who was so unerringly fluent to the Opposition. "I stand here, loving you, and let you do all the talking. But you do understand, don't you, that if anything took you out of my life now, the sun would stop shining."

"Yes, Charles," she said, the room between them.

"Yes, but don't expect me to say things like that often, will you, because I'll never be much good at it. You said 'I adore you' quite easily just now, and I envied you. I should get red and stammer if I tried. I can make speeches to the House, but not to you. But you know all that, don't you."

"Yes, Charles."

"Yes, because I do—adore you." They laughed a little and he was the first to turn still farther away from temptation. "We've missed so much already, trying to do the right thing—and after all, is it the right thing we've been trying to do? Oh, Lord, I wonder what one does first in a case like this!"

"Charles! Don't!"

"What's wrong now?"

"*'This sort of thing'—'a case like this'*—you make it sound horrible!"

"You want me to say we're different from—all the others who have faced the same thing." He swung round on one foot toward her, easy, poised, oddly boyish in his slimness, with a puzzled frown between his eyes.

"Well—yes, I suppose I do."

"But they all say that too, you know."

He resumed his uneven pacing, kicking gently at things as he passed, his hands in his pockets. She watched him, from her strange stillness.

"That sounded just like an M.P.," she accused, at last.

"But I *am* an M.P.," he pointed out mildly.

"I see," she sighed.

"What's that you see?"

"It wasn't clever of you, Charles, to suppose that I expected anything."

He regarded her, at a standstill, one foot balanced on its toe in eloquent uncertainty.

"I know I'm not clever," he apologized, "but I seem to be rather more lost than usual."

"You remind me that you're an M.P., with a reputation to be even more carefully guarded than Royalty's. You're headed for the Cabi-

net. There must be no scandal. No talk, even. I know it. Don't rub it in!"

"Nancy, such a thing never entered my head!" He was appalled. "There can be a hell of a scandal, for all I care about the Cabinet!"

"Charles!" But there was exultation in the protest.

"Look here—shall we chuck it?"

He stood still, one foot balanced expectantly on its toe, his head up, his hands in his pockets. A splendid excitement possessed him, the persuasive ferment which attends the projected burning of bridges.

Twenty years of brilliant effort, a quarter of a century of undeviating ambition went overboard on that casual-seeming question. Seldom, even in a land where politics is still a gentleman's job, had a man steered a straighter course toward ultimate responsible statesmanship. Seldom, even in a Parliament which harbors the sanest brains of a whirling era, occurs a man so fitted by birth, accretion, and personal magnetism, to hold and to impress opinions on the destiny of a nation.

But naturally no such self-encomiums were dreamed of by Charles Gordon, proposing in a dozen light words to chuck it. For him at

the moment the issue was simple—he was willing to throw away the chance of a long coveted Ministry for the glorious certainty of a venture which he suddenly valued more.

"Cicely would divorce me like a shot, you know," he added quietly.

She gasped at that, for the words were bald. But his eyes waited on hers, steady and anxious and unembarrassed.

Nancy caught giddily at reason. And the one stationary object on a delirious horizon was James Mortimer.

"You say that," she accused breathlessly, "you *dare* to say such a thing now, with the Prime Minister here in your very house?"

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Everything, I should think. Charles, he's got something up his sleeve, hasn't he? You two have been hatching something this week, down here. That shows me out."

"Now why drag poor old Mortimer into it?" he complained, not too convincingly. "He's not here as Prime Minister—you know that. He's come down as an amateur clockmaker who happens to be my friend. I have him in every now and then to adjust the clocks—he says so himself."

"You're hedging, Charles."

"I know I am. But where does the Prime Minister, if you must call him that, come in, between you and me?"

"Between is just the word," she echoed ruefully. "He adores you too. And he wants you in his blessed Cabinet. Doesn't he!"

"He hasn't said so. Cabinets aside—we're fond of one another."

"Suppose he did say so, now," she insisted.

"I could always refuse, Nancy."

"You would—have to refuse?"

"Oh, yes," he said simply.

She understood. Lenient in such matters as the times are becoming, Mortimer would not have a man in the Cabinet who could not keep his own house in order.

Much hung on her next words, and they were long in coming.

"You mean you'd give up politics now—lose your prestige in the Divorce Court—disappoint *him*—for me?"

"If you like," he dared her.

The choice was wholly hers to make now. She faced it sturdily, never questioning his right to demand it of her. Even with him, life would never let her off entirely. Even with him, it laid on her burdens beyond her

strength. She was used to that. And she knew the answer too.

"Charles—there aren't many people like you any more—even in the Cabinet! The world needs something like you to believe in now and then. Even Government knows that! You're good for—. Oh, well, what's the good of our wishing? The best man wins. And that's James Mortimer."

"You donate me, then, to my country—on the grounds that I'll be good for it," he interpreted ironically.

"Yes, Charles."

"Thanks very much."

He turned away, and she saw with terror that he was hurt, and a little angry, and disappointed in her. She had never seen him like that before. That was the way other people behaved. But never Charles!

What she did not understand was the sickening bump with which she had brought him to earth. For he knew in his soul that she was right. A great many people, including Cicely and the Prime Minister, counted on him to keep up his end. And he had a schoolboy's horror of letting people down.

Still his remorse for those three curt words to Nancy was almost instantaneous. A man

built a life. And then gave a woman power to overturn it or not, as she chose. And then whichever she did, he was not satisfied.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said, over his shoulder. "I'm too much in love with you to treat you well! I never meant to snap."

That was Charles!

"I was only trying to say—you stand for a good deal, as you are. You're honest—and fair—and very lovable. Your house is famous for the old things, the gracious things, the standards, the decencies. Your wife is the perfect hostess——"

"When she's at home," he threw in.

"—when she's at home," she acknowledged. "You're supposed to be devoted to her—you've been so staunchly impeccable for so long—both you and Cicely. I'm not going to smash you now. I haven't got the cheek!"

"But I deserve to be smashed," he maintained obstinately. "I'm a hollow mockery to begin with—and if I should crumble, I wouldn't be missed for long."

"I won't let you crumble! I won't have them saying with smugness and satisfaction—'So he's no better than the rest of us!' You *are!* You're Charles! I want you to go on being Charles!"

He sighed.

"It's not a happy fate, Nancy."

"Who's happy anyway?" she cried, with twisted lips.

"Have you by any chance forgotten what happened when you came in that door?"

She shook her head mutely.

"Very well, then." He came a few steps down the room, planted himself there, and unconsciously assumed the casual, almost diffident pose—one hand in his pocket, his weight on one foot—with which the badgered House was so familiar. "You've been doing most of the talking so far—and I've been very quiet and good, on the whole. But your logic happens to be pretty bad, and your premise is full of holes, and your proposal is presumptuous. If you think I can be bullied into squatting on a pedestal in the public eye forever, just to save their pink-and-white illusions about something that doesn't even exist—you have still to hear from me! What's more," he continued, warming to it, "I don't want anything Mortimer's got to offer without you too ——"

"You can't have it and me too!"

"Then to hell with it!"

His vehemence surprised them both. That

tardy moment when he had allowed her conviction and sincerity to weigh, and had spoken to her sharply because she had unsettled his own convictions, was atoned for. He knew now what he wanted, and had once more attained the enviable state of mind where he didn't care how he got it. So long as he never let Nancy down, the rest could rip.

"Have I made myself clear?" he inquired gently, and went to lay his arms around her from behind.

She drew a long breath, and both hands went nervously to her temples where a small, insistent ache was growing.

"That's not fair, Charles," she said, and waited till he went away again, with a sigh. "I shall be gone about three weeks. I'll have lots of time to think, in the cathedral towns, and if anything sensible occurs to me I'll write a letter. To the Club," she added wryly, with some ill-gotten knowledge of the rules.

"But of course you must write, Nancy, I——"

"Oh, what is there to say, Charles, that I haven't said now?"

"I could bear to hear some of it again," he reflected wistfully, and it was only by the

greatest effort that she did not relent and fly at him.

"Mummy will always know where I am, if you want to reach me," she said, after a moment.

"I suppose you couldn't—stay somewhere within reach to do all that thinking?" he suggested diffidently.

"The idea is to get some money at the same time," she reminded him wearily. "Mummy and I can't bear to think of giving up the cottage, and this job will keep its precious roof over our heads a while longer."

"But you oughtn't to have to worry about things like that!" he cried with a futile impatience. "You ought to be here, both of you. I ought to be looking after you, this place ought to be yours, everything I have ought to be yours——"

"Everything you have is Cicely's—particularly the Grange!" She turned toward the door. "It's only you that ought to be mine."

"That could be arranged."

His voice followed her softly; that fatal, beguiling voice which could woo the back benches without effort or strain. She paused, her hand on the knob, as he had seen her first in this momentous interview.

"Mr. Mortimer would shoot me first," she said. "And rightly."

"Nancy—wait——"

The tall doors closed behind her.

## III

HE wandered moodily about the room for a time, contemplating his uprooted existence.

He had never meant this to happen.

He and Cicely were doing well enough on their famous *laissez faire* basis. For years now, he had contrived a blessed preoccupation with small, daily things, looking to his politics for excitement, making romance out of his winning of the vote.

Cicely kept his house, in which she took a becoming chatelaine's pride, and charmed his guests—inexplicably, that was all he wanted from her, and as much as she was willing to give. Probing vague memory, he supposed that he had been in love with her beauty once—but chiefly, her mother had approved of him in those days when he was a promising young man with a gilded future, provided he survived the War. Even during the wracking uncertainty of 1915 it was impossible to con-

ceive that Charles Gordon, young England incarnate, might not go on living. James Mortimer had known stray moments of sheer terror at sight of a telegram—and his days were full of telegrams—but most of the time even to him, Charles' future seemed inevitable, and Charles' future had materialized beyond even the Prime Minister's hopes. And Cicely was still heard to declare that she had married him for his house.

After fourteen years she was still a lovely thing to look at. But he was a fastidious man, and proud, and he had learned very soon that he was not really wanted. His reaction to this was merely a gradual withdrawal. He was never the sort to rage or plead or reproach. It had wanted a bit of getting used to—the knowledge that she preferred to be let alone. But somehow, looking back, it seemed not to have mattered much. The absorbing matters of post-war Parliament engulfed him. He was overworked, and his hours were likely to be very irregular. Seeing less and less of one another, they put it that he did not like to disturb her—and each felt a secret relief.

He had known lonely times, hungry times, since then, but there was always a new debate or an election to occupy them before long.

Women eyed him wistfully, but few of them dreamed of trespassing, for he and Cicely seemed so perfectly suited to one another, so amiable, and so content. He had never much time or energy left for philandering, which is a pastime for the idle; and when he was too busy to go along Cicely lunched or dined or attended theatres discreetly, with unimpeachable groups of people. As the 1920's broadened, her chaperonage became less evident and finally vanished altogether—but no one took any notice of that. It was a friendly marriage, they never got on one another's nerves and never asked one another embarrassing questions. And doubtless it ran more smoothly than if there had been more of passion in it.

But now, quite suddenly, a Nancy grown disturbing—a Nancy, young and quick and honest, sweeping away his pleasant preoccupations, stinging him alive again, compelling unwilling thought in the comfortable, numbed inner corners of his brain. Shy, secretive, sensitive to rebuffs for all his public career, and vastly uncommunicative, now he stood before himself and gazed at his own late flowering, and felt a sort of dizzy fright.

It had got him. He was in for it now—this thing people wrote books about, that filled

divorce courts and theatres, that drove humanity to incredible heights and depths.

Love. He had caught it at last. And along with dismay, he was aware of an inward secret kicking up of heels. This was life. He was still to see life, after fourteen years of Cicely. He had funked life, fobbing himself off with politics and amateur philosophy. And now it had found him out—caught him up—run him to earth.

No one escaped, then. Sooner or later it was bound to happen. Nancy. Love. Of course.

"I say, Charles, have you seen anything of Nancy?"

He turned, as guiltily as though his hidden, exultant thought had been audible.

Johnny stood there in the long windows, wearing white flannels and swinging a tennis racquet. Rather a dear, Johnny—with his sister Cicely's fine cut profile and disarming intonations. What now? Oh, yes, he wanted Nancy.

Charles sent an involuntary humorous glance toward the door where she had last stood—where they had stood together.

"Wasn't she playing tennis with you?" he hazarded in instinctive self-defence.

"She was, but she beat me one game and when we stopped to talk we found we hadn't got any cigarettes. So I nipped up to the house for some, and when I got back to the courts she'd vanished."

"I see."

He knew too well what that talk had been about, and how inevitable was its outcome. *I'll never be satisfied with nice boys like Johnny. There will always be you.* Yet Johnny was the logical one. Life was a bit thick, when you came down to it. Beside it, international politics were simple.

Johnny came into the room and sat down with an air of permanence, his neat sport shoes dangling over the arm of the chair, the racquet askew on the floor beside him.

"I've been down in the rose garden shouting for her," he went on cheerfully, "but she wasn't there."

"She must be somewhere about the house, then."

Charles recovered the letter, dropped into his coat pocket in the dawn of history and forgotten. He would post it at once, thus escaping with his new guilt and its surging exultation, from Johnny's candid gaze.

"Where are you off to?" complained Johnny, swinging his feet. "Don't go."

"Only trying to post a letter. I'm buying another horse," he confided. "Rather a special one, for Nancy to ride when she comes here."

"Oh, that's good." Johnny strove for an equal nonchalance. "Sounds as though she might be coming oftener."

"I hope so." (*Then you shut me out of your life entirely. I can't come back.* But that was nonsense. Of course she must come back. She belonged here, she had always belonged here, in his house. And yet it would never be the same now. *We may try to think Cicely wouldn't mind if she knew.* Well, would Cicely mind? He knew in his honest soul that she would. Nancy had mentioned her pride. He knew all about that too. Cicely was divinely spoilt. It was one of the things that made her so charming. The world was Cicely's footstool, and the people who lived there were her slaves. Yes, Cicely would mind, there was no getting away from that. And she would have to know as soon as she got home. They couldn't go on like this. And when she knew, what then? A giddy prospect altogether.)

He dragged himself back to Johnny's voice,

so like Cicely's own in its pleasant English intonations—light, and somehow lilting—the gay Woodville voice. It ran in the family, as recognizable as an hereditary nose or chin.

"It's been a nice house party, Charles. Can't we do this sort of thing a little oftener?"

"Have you been dull with Cicely away?" He felt a real compunction, for he was fond of Johnny. "I'm sorry. It will be brighter now that she's coming home." He realized as he spoke the uncertainty, the absurdity of such a statement now.

"Different sort of bright, isn't it," suggested Johnny diffidently. "I mean, Cicely's crowd is no end of fun and all that, but—well, it's not old Mortimer and his sort, is it!"

"Well, no, not quite. I was afraid you might find this week a trifle too—Conservative."

"Charles." Johnny brought his feet to the carpet and sat with his elbows on his knees. "I love Cicely, God knows. We both do. But I get awfully sick of being Cicely's kid brother."

Through his own inner turmoil, Charles became aware that the boy was counting on him for something more than an embarrassing chat about the mislaid Nancy. With an effort he

brought his mind to focus on something outside himself.

"I see," he said, leaving it wide open.

"You see, this time Mr. Mortimer—well, he's talked to me, if you know what I mean. Yesterday we had a glass of sherry together in the library before lunch—just the two of us. And he talked—well, he talked to me almost as though I was you. Isn't he a great old boy?"

"Yes. Great. All ways," said Charles sincerely, and his mind slid back again, twisting away from his will, into its own whirlpool. (Mortimer would have to know too—Mortimer, who liked to come here and mend clocks, and who worshipped Cicely—it would make a difference to Mortimer. Oh, Nancy, Nancy, one kiss and the world is lost! We can't undo it now—we wouldn't if we could. But Mortimer is going to mind!)

"Charles. I think I've changed my plans."

Charles caught at the last word—it conveyed nothing.

"Plans?" he repeated, wrenching his attention round to Johnny again.

"All that about painting, you know—I do like to paint, but—and thanks awfully for be-

ing on my side against Cicely about going to Paris, but——"

"What's the matter with that? I said you could study in Paris next year and I meant it. I'm on your side. Cicely will come round." (Next year—but there would be no next year of this sort, perhaps. There was a strangeness, an unreality, a doom, about everything he said. It was like being under sentence of death—a time was coming when he would pass deliberately, with his eyes open, from Cicely's world to Nancy's. That is, provided they decided to chuck things—provided she was willing——)

"I know—and I do appreciate it awfully. But—the fact is, I keep thinking—well, why shouldn't I be like you, as far as possible, instead of being a painter!" Johnny seemed to hold his breath for the answer.

"It sounds like a riddle," said Charles intelligently, after a minute, groping.

Johnny grinned at him with affection. Good old Charles. One could count on him. A bit foggy at times, like this morning, but always on the spot eventually. The right sort of man for a sister to marry. He endeavored to make himself clear.

"I mean, Mr. Mortimer wouldn't think so

much of a painter, would he? *I* wouldn't think so much of any painter as I do of you."

The thing began to dawn on Charles. The most endearing tribute the young can pay—emulation. All his life the boy had been fascinated by paint—haunting the galleries with his childish sixpences; daubing at canvases; borrowing impossible objects to sit to him; studying doggedly, hoping, despairing, elated again—while Cicely, who liked her little court in attendance, protested that Paris would do him no good—not just yet—there was always the Slade—until Johnny damned the Slade out of sheer satiety, sick of its repetitious virtues.

And now he had changed his plans, he said, and wanted to be like Charles instead. Charles spoke with difficulty, after another pause.

"Stop paying me compliments, Johnny."

"Oh, hell, Charles, you know what I mean." Johnny was embarrassed too. "You see, I heard that debate in the House last month—you didn't know I was there, did you! Lord, I nearly blubbed when they began to cheer you! I wish Cicely could have heard it!" he added artlessly—Cicely having never set foot in the House in her pampered life. "Of course I'd been thinking things over for some time,

or I shouldn't have gone to the House that day—and since then I've made up my mind. Of course I don't mean I could ever do what you've done—but I'd like to stand for Parliament anyway, I think."

"It isn't always like that, you know," Charles felt called upon to remind him, following conscientiously now.

"Oh, rot, I know that, of course. But—you must know what I mean, Charles. Can't you remember when you saw it all for the first time? The mace—and the prayer—and the wigs, and——"

"Johnny, you're stage-struck," remarked Charles gently. He knew too well the solemn intoxication of ceremony. Much of the strength of the Empire lies in it still. "Keep away from the Lord Mayor's Show, or you'll want to go and live in the Mansion House!"

"I mean it, Charles!"

"I know you do, old man."

"As a matter of fact—seeing you on your feet like that, for an hour at a time, fight, fight, fighting—well, it made paint brushes and messing about in Paris look rather footling, somehow——"

"Have you been to Burlington House

lately?" Charles was surveying him with undisguised affection.

"Oh, I shall always shed a tear for the Academy," admitted Johnny cheerfully. "But I'm not going to be a painter."

"You picked the wrong debate to listen to, I'm afraid. You should have seen me take a beating. That's been done too, you know!"

"I'd like to have a go at it," said Johnny doggedly.

"I know how you feel."

Johnny gulped. Good old Charles. Always knowing how a chap felt, and making jokes only in the right places. Jolly good job of Cicely's, getting him into the family. One would never have suspected her of so much good sense.

"Would you mind—that is—how does one start?"

Charles was really touched. And he shared Mortimer's conviction that the House was badly in need of gentlemen. It needed Johnny, then. Mortimer would be pleased.

"I suppose if you want to begin walking in my footsteps at the next election—" (Again his words echoed back at him derisively. And where would he be, next election? Out. It was almost inconceivable that Nancy should

persist in her altruistic determination to donate him to his needy country. He was a human being, not a burnt offering. His country had had nearly twenty years of him, off and on. And now Johnny could carry on in his place. There was irony in that, for Johnny could have had both Nancy and the election—but it was no time to dwell on such things.) "Look here, if you're really serious about this, I might be able to get you my own first constituency, oddly enough."

"Good start, what?" Johnny could not say more. He had put his young soul into this matter and was feeling the reaction.

"If you look at it that way!" Charles took a perverse satisfaction in these double meanings. "And if worst comes to worst, there's sure to be an Assistant Undersecretaryship up somebody's sleeve. I'll speak to Mortimer."

He would give Johnny a leg up before he let himself out, at least. Nancy would approve of that. And having seen Johnny safely launched, he would retire—something in him flinched—via the Divorce Court. That is, if Cicely—ah, she was going to mind! Dear, spoilt Cicely, who didn't want him herself, who would manage to be horribly hurt that

he could want to go. Could he do such a thing to Cicely, after all? One didn't hurt Cicely, it wasn't fair. Nancy was not spoilt. Nancy expected nothing, Nancy would understand—but that wasn't fair either. From them that hath not——

"Thanks awfully. You know, Charles, this past week has made a lot of difference in my life," Johnny was saying.

"How's that?"

"Well—the fact is, I've—never seen so much of Nancy before."

"Is that good for you, do you think?" he queried sympathetically, and braced himself against the happy confidence in Johnny's gaze.

"Well," grinned Johnny again, "that depends. Sometimes I think she won't have me at any price."

"I shouldn't count on it if I were you." (This was another part of it he dreaded. Johnny was going to mind worst of all, perhaps. *That youth to youth rot*—but was it really such a fallacy as Nancy thought? Doubtless one outgrew it at Johnny's age, he could scarcely remember. But doubtless too it was pretty bad while it lasted. He had

married Cicely at about that age—jockeyed into it—too young——)

"Of course I realize I'm not much of a catch, but still——"

"Still, she might do worse," said Charles thoughtfully.

"Well—yes."

"I see your point."

"Don't *you* think she's marvellous?"

"Nancy? Oh, very."

"Of course she can't touch our Cicely for looks," Johnny conceded loyally.

"I suppose not."

"But then, Nancy's only a kid."

"True."

"I forgive you your tiresome indifference, Charles, because I am in a position to appreciate Cicely too. Probably if I weren't her brother I'd be madly in love with her like practically everybody else. And I probably wouldn't take everybody else as calmly as you do."

"Oh, I've got used to it, rather."

"You'd have rather a busy time, being jealous of them all, wouldn't you!"

"Yes, I've given that up."

"Oh, yes."

"Quite."

It was a conversation not altogether without its humor. Given half a chance, Charles would have enjoyed it. In the circumstances, it was nightmare.

"You know, Charles, I point with pride to you and Cicely as the shining example of what I'd like to be, after some fifteen years of married life."

"Fourteen."

"Fourteen, then. I mean, you do seem to get on together so frightfully well. That is, if she wants a Mediterranean cruise like this and you can't get away, she goes along by herself and has it. And if you want some shooting and she doesn't, you pop up to Scotland and shoot. So much nicer than all the bowing and scraping most husbands and wives do about being separated for a few weeks, now and then. And besides, you must have so much more to talk about when you do join up again."

"Oh, rather," said Charles to all this, comprehensively.

"Works out wonderfully, doesn't it?"

"Wonderfully."

"But then, of course, Cicely is Cicely, we mustn't forget that. Any chance of her getting home tonight, do you think?"

"Tonight?" Charles fumbled at it hastily.

He had rather lost track again. "Oh, you mean tonight! No, I hardly think so. The boat docked this morning, but she likes a day in Town, you know—luggage and what-not. She'll turn up in time for luncheon tomorrow, probably."

"Awfully bucked about having her back, aren't you!"

"You notice that?"

"Oh, you may think you're not looking pleased, but you can't fool me! Everybody knows the way you and Cicely get on. Honestly, Charles, have you two ever had a quarrel?"

"A quarrel?" (Well, honestly, had they? Perhaps not. It never seemed to matter enough—) "We've been battling for weeks about sending you to Paris next year," he took cover hastily.

"Oh, that! Well, that's all settled now, isn't it. Won't Cicely be pleased!"

"Yes," said Charles. "She's got her way again."

"Isn't it funny—she always gets her own way, by fair means or foul, without even seeming to try! God is always on Cicely's side." And Johnny grinned with a certain brotherly pride.

"You're sure it wasn't the devil, prompting you to chuck painting for my sort of job?"

"Quite sure, Charles. Look here, why don't you run up to Town and fetch her down tonight? *I* should, if I were you!"

"Possibly. But she'd think I'd gone mad."

"Yes, I suppose she would. It's all a part of your comfortable scheme of things, isn't it, that you should kick your heels at home till she turns up."

"Habit," said Charles, sententiously. "Pernicious habit."

"The last letter I had from her said she was quite fit again."

"Oh, quite, I think."

"It wasn't anything serious, was it—I mean the reason for her needing a rest all of a sudden and pitching on this cruise?"

"No—just the same old thing that overtakes her now and then—a recurrent malady the doctors are too clever to diagnose as boredom!"

Johnny yawned.

"Oh, we all get that! Rotten luck you couldn't bung off too."

"Yes, wasn't it! But the House was still sitting, and it was no good her hanging about in that foul weather. (If he had gone to the

Mediterranean too—but he never went with Cicely when she was bored. That was part of their system. And even if he had managed somehow to postpone it, that kiss was bound to happen, sooner or later. *I told them you were my favorite uncle—I felt that way about you then!* And now—*It wasn't your fault, and it isn't something that will blow over*——)

"Where *is* everybody?" Johnny rose and stretched himself, at peace with the world. "The house sounds like a tomb! I say, did you know old Mortimer's got the grandfather clock in bits all over the stairs?"

"Is he still at that?" murmured Charles, dragging his mind back again by the heels. "Bless his soul! Let's go and worry him. Everybody else is playing golf."

"Where has Nancy got to, I wonder! Oh, Nancy!" bellowed Johnny on his way to the door. "Nan-*cy!*"

A light, gay voice floated in from the hall, transfixing Charles for the second time that morning with his hand on the inner knob of the open door.

"Wrong! It's only me!"

"Cicely!" cried Johnny joyously, charging past him into the hall. "Me first, Charles!"

She emerged, unruffled and smiling from

his bearish embrace, and kissed Charles very gracefully. He perceived then that a personable young man stood quietly behind her, looking at first glance a good deal like lots of other young men.

She was always turning up with something like this. Usually they faded out of the picture quite soon, puzzled or resentful over the obvious good fellowship which existed between Cicely and her husband when they had almost dared to hope that Charles would prove to be some sort of excrescence that would never do. Often their fingers were badly burnt and Charles was secretly sorry for them. Sometimes they were foreigners, who didn't matter but who were likely to become obnoxious. And invariably Cicely regarded these developments with wide, candid eyes; Cicely, the soul of discretion.

She introduced him, the current young man, with her usual insouciance—Richard Neville—he had been on the cruise—he had driven her down from London because he lived at Aylesford not far away—he would stay to luncheon.

(Oh, God, thought Charles. Another one.)

## IV

CICELY was long and blonde and lovely, and the matchless straight lines of her travelling dress meant Paris. It could be seen at a glance that a man would often want to break her neck.

After those fourteen years of marriage, Charles was still able to behold her with appreciation. Her beauty had the intimate aloofness of a smiling Gainsborough duchess, the remote challenge of Romney's soft-skinned, enigmatic ladies. She was a masterpiece of flesh and blood, almost too perfect for reality. It was as though she condescended to be human, much as Marie Antoinette played at being shepherdess. She was a treasure which any man might be proud to house and to exhibit—but there was no warmth in her, he knew, no comfort for a needy soul. You reached out for her and grasped illusion only, which left an empty hand.

"And how about that casual day in Town

now, Charles?" Johnny gloated in naïve triumph. "After two months away she legs it home to you as fast as she can, like the darling she is!"

"Aren't you pleased, Charles?" she murmured with a deliberate malice lost on Johnny.

"I'm speechless," he said truthfully, kissing her hand palm up in a devoted way he had.

Richard Neville's grave grey gaze took in that gesture with the unselfconscious interest of a nice child.

"They'll all be speechless," said Johnny. "Charles wouldn't let us hope for you till tomorrow, but I'll bet he had a hunch all the time! I'll tell 'em you've got back. Mr. Mortimer is here, Cicely."

"Splendid. Is there a party?"

"Five or six people." Charles was still holding the hand he had kissed.

"How nice." She smiled up at him confidingly.

"Nancy's here, too, but she's lost. I'll go dig her up, she'll want to help you unpack, she always does."

Johnny seized the opportunity to escape in quest of her, and went carolling up the stairs.

Charles and Cicely glanced at one another warily, with masking smiles, as the three of

them moved into the morning-room. Richard Neville, silent, self-possessed, continued to take in everything around him with the sober attentiveness of a stranger-child.

Cicely sat down on the chesterfield, pulling off her gloves. Her quick eyes, which saw everything without once losing their limpid candour, had noted that Charles was looking very fit. She had always liked his looks. He was a man to be proud of, a man to count on, a man to love. Yet somehow she had managed to waste him.

She was often struck by the obvious desirableness of him when she returned from these vagrancies abroad. One tired very quickly of the Latin type, she found, and as for Russians—! She had always meant to go out to America, for she cherished delusions about the Old South and its gallant gentlemen, but this time she had gone to the Mediterranean instead; on a cruise too, against her better judgment. And the Mediterranean had sufficed.

She sat down, pulling daintily at her gloves and thinking how nice Charles looked, except for that coat. A pity to waste him. Well, it was too late now.

She motioned Richard Neville to a place beside her.

It is possible that the idea of lunching at the Grange had come originally as something of a shock to him. But with the tremendous receptivity of modern youth, he had instantly applied the acid test—*why not?*—and found no satisfactory answer. It was not impossible for a product of this casual age whose conscience was clear and whose self-respect was whole to lunch at the house of a man whose unappreciated wife he himself happened to love.

He and Cicely had discussed all that with comparative sanity, driving down from London in his little two-seater. During a period of enchantment in that curious fourth dimension called shipboard, that Never-never-land, where the individual past is forgotten and a collective future can never come, they had rather lost sight of things it was now necessary to remember. Now they were face to face again with the world they lived in, and it wanted thinking out.

Applying what they were pleased to call commonsense to the matter, they reasoned that it would be the height of that vague folly known as priggishness not to come down together in Richard's car, since he lived with an aunt at Aylesford and the Grange was a scant

three miles out of his way thither. After Italy's florid beauties under the hot white sun of the Mediterranean, their English eyes were eager for the greens and greys of Kent's hedged byways; her unmistakable skyline punctuated by the homely oast-houses; and the slender forests of her hop-poles while the vines are still young and come curving upward from the ground like a dancer's skirts.

Charles, they said, would be the last to grudge them this mildly sentimental close to those picturesque two months abroad. Not that either of them thought of Charles as a *mari complaisant*—but Cicely knew and managed to convince Richard that Charles always saw things in proportion, and never jumped to embarrassing conclusions.

Richard was striving to teach himself commonsense about Charles too. Here was a man who had not succeeded in making his wife happy—(Richard was still young enough and uncivilized enough to believe in the fundamental fairy story about marriage which assures us that we have the right to expect to live happily ever after)—a man who was not a drunkard nor a profligate nor a pauper—a man who by all the rules should be an ideal husband. But Cicely in her adorable frank-

ness had made it quite plain that the thing had never really clicked.

Cicely had been just and honest as few women in her position have ever been. She made no pretense that Charles was a monster. The most infatuated lover could not have felt sorry for her as Charles' wife. Rather, one felt sorry for Charles, that so much beauty, so much intoxication mysteriously was not for him, and that he did not even mind. For it was plain too that this amazing marriage broke nobody's heart, and that until now nobody had been actively dissatisfied with it.

Until now.

Nevertheless, during the past two months young Richard, watching with dazzled eyes the significant flowering of Cicely, kiss by guilty kiss, had felt at first in his native decency like a particularly low sort of burglar. Gradually a Pygmalion pride in his own handiwork triumphed over his natural compunction, reason reiterating that he was robbing nobody, for Cicely's love had never belonged to anyone else. A man has a right to his own masterpiece. . . .

"But are you sure," he had inquired as they reached the sweet green hills which surround the tidy village of Sevenoaks, "are you sure

that if or when he sees that I am so terribly in love with you he won't yield to a more or less natural impulse to kick me out?"

"Well, as a matter of fact," she chuckled, "he did virtually kick a Frenchman once, in somewhat similar circumstances."

"My family was here when William the Conqueror came," he insisted hastily.

"You'll do," she crooned.

This made a silence.

"It wasn't so much the Frenchman," she reflected a few miles further on, where the road runs beside Knole Park. "Or the fear of losing me. There was an election coming on."

"Cæsar's wife?" he queried ironically.

"Politics!" she sighed. "Especially English politics, I think, are a very naïve business. One of Charles' strong points has always been his ironclad respectability. You know the sort of thing—cheery journalism about his famous old house and his charming wife in it—hunters nosing his pockets for sugar—dogs swarming to meet the master—the pluperfect country gentleman—Charles!"

Richard frowned at the blurring ribbon of road which slipped away beneath the wheels.

"Then he isn't going to take *this* lying down!"

"Take what?" she echoed provokingly.

"Don't be an idiot." Young and masterful and moved, he spared a long glance for her. "You're going to leave all that, aren't you—for me?"

"Am I?" she countered weakly. She liked being bullied. It was never Charles' way.

"It seems absurd, in this day and age, that it could really affect his career——"

"It may seem absurd—but not to the Prime Minister."

"Where does he come into it?"

"You don't know James Mortimer! He comes into everything!"

"Are you afraid of him?" he smiled incredulously, that anything so remote as Downing Street could bear upon what had happened to them on the shores of the Mediterranean.

"He'll be on Charles' side."

"My dear girl, everybody will be on Charles' side," he reminded her grimly. "Remember, I can offer you almost anything except respectability. And I gathered," he added with some bitterness, "that you had had enough of that!"

She laid her hand quickly on his on the wheel.

"It isn't easy to know what to do," she said.

"I've got to have time to think. You see—I *like* Charles——"

"That's good."

"Richard—*darling*——"

"All right—sorry—what then?"

"Well—he counts on me, rather. I——"

"Now, look here, Cicely, with no effort at all I could work up a lot of sympathy for Charles. One has a tremendous amount of respect for him, of course—politically. But what does that come to? Beside your happiness—nothing."

"I——"

"Gradually, and against my better judgment, I have come to the insane conclusion that I am the Lord's appointed to make you happy here below. It doesn't make sense, but there it is. I don't deserve any credit for it—for me it's just a kind of happy accident. But in view of my newly discovered mission in life, don't encourage me to be sorry for Charles!"

And now, as he sat down in Charles' house, having come there out of commonsense and his own clear conscience, an involuntary exclamation shot through Richard's brain—"Allah, it is a man!"

While Charles, watching him—"Oh, Lord, but this is the real thing! Cicely oughtn't to

do this!" And then, noting the strange, tragic shadows round the boy's eyes, and an appealing leanness of jaw which absolved the face from too much youngness—"It's not fair."

They spoke casually, over their cigarettes; of Eights Week and Derby Day; of golf courses they had known and dogs they had loved; agreed about stag-hunting and the pruning of roses—Cicely silent and smiling between them in a haze of smoke. And in those first minutes, when a man's measure is taken by his peer, they knew unerringly, each of them, that with greater fortune they might in that curious chemical fusion of kindred souls have been lifelong friends.

Richard Neville, born of itinerant Army parents and brought up anywhere and anyhow on their increasingly inadequate income—jerked out of school by the War which gave the *coup de grace* to family finances and witnessed the death of both his father and mother—Richard, sensitively aware of the sunny, gracious beauty of the Grange, was suddenly overwhelmed by the accumulated nostalgia of the homeless. Charles embodied his whole idea of what a man should be—Charles, with his horses and his dogs and his unconscious, inborn pride of Place. Richard felt rather

like a little stray dog—and he wanted to wag his tail and smile fatuously under Charles' kind hand.

"I'm sorry to be a bother, Charles, but——" Nancy stood in the doorway, dressed for travelling, and carrying a small bag. "Why, Cicely, when did you come?"

They kissed prettily on either cheek, and Richard rose.

Rebellion flared up in Charles at sight of her, about to leave his house. Give her up—make her happy—neither looked possible to him, so young she was, so confiding, so much too wonderful to need him. But could anyone else do better for her, he wondered. Would anyone else try so hard? Could anyone else want her half as badly? . . .

"But you're not going!" Cicely was protesting. "Not before luncheon, when I've only just come!"

She felt the need of support at luncheon—a friendly audience for Richard and herself to play unconcernment to, under James Mortimer's raking eye. She had never minded that before because no one but Richard had ever mattered liked this. But she faced this homecoming with an almost virginal self-consciousness. Surely no woman could be as much in

love as she was with Richard and not give herself away to practically everyone but Charles! For it had happened to her at last—the ridiculous, delicious upheaval which she had long ago relegated to the heroines of old-fashioned novels. She had caught it, like measles late in life, and caught it hard. And when James Mortimer found her out he was bound to disapprove.

Disapproval from any source wilted spoilt Cicely at once. Nancy could be counted on at least to divide Mortimer's attention. Besides, she had always been fond of Nancy, and there was a dress, worn only once, which she meant to give her. The wrong color for one as blonde as herself, but a lovely line. They were almost of a size.

"I'm sorry, but I've just had a message from London," Nancy explained briefly.

"Lillian——?" queried Charles in instant alarm.

"No, no, Mummy's down at the cottage, of course. It's about that wretched job, and I promised to come up this afternoon and see about it."

"What job?" inquired Cicely, interested.

"It's a friend of Mummy's. Of course we don't know her awfully well, but—I'm going

to be her paid companion on a motor tour." She voiced it bravely, before the stranger.

"What fun," said Cicely, with tact.

"Please, Charles, may I have a car to take me to the station? I want to catch the twelve-forty train."

"You haven't too much time." He rang the bell. "Isn't this rather sudden? What about luncheon?"

"I can get something in the train. Say good-bye to the rest of them for me, won't you. I've seen Johnny. I hate dashing off like this, Cicely, but——"

"I'll come along to the station," said Charles. "I've got a letter to post."

"Nonsense, you'll miss luncheon. I'll take the letter." She held out her hand for it, her eyes warning him.

A footman loomed behind her, saw the bag, and stood waiting.

"Ask Rogers to bring the small car round at once," said Charles. "I'm driving Miss Collins to the twelve-forty."

"Very good, sir."

The man took up the bag and vanished.

"But Charles, there's no need—I can post your beastly letter myself——"

"There's all the time in the world before

luncheon, and I'm just as good a chauffeur as Rogers is." Charles smiled his quiet, unemphatic smile into her eyes and moved with her toward the door, the letter in his hand. "Shan't be long, you two," he said over his shoulder.

Cicely threw a careless kiss after them, and turned away to find a cigarette. But young Richard stood where he was, looking at the open doorway through which they had passed. his grave eyes wide with a new wisdom.

It looked to him as though things might be clearing up.

"Oh, hang it all, Richard," said Cicely behind him, and he heard the small, irritable rasp of a match. "I can't do it. I've got to stick."

"Why?" he asked quietly, without moving.

"He counts on me. I can't let him down. Mortimer's here in the house. You see how it is."

Richard removed his eyes from the doorway to contemplate her in mild astonishment. Was she so blind to the obvious? Was it possible that *she* couldn't see how it was?

"Are you sure Charles would mind—so much?" he queried, feeling his way.

"Mind?" repeated Cicely, with a real sur-

prise that he could question anyone's minding the loss of her lovely self. "Really, Richard!" —she smiled, between amusement and pique. "And besides—James Mortimer would have a fit," she added with a certain satisfaction.

He made an impatient gesture which resented the Prime Minister's reiterative intrusion into Richard Neville's private affairs.

"Is James Mortimer God?" he demanded.

"Very nearly, in this house."

Richard's eyes went again to the open door, where things had looked to him so plain. What did the Prime Minister think about that, then?

"But perhaps I could still be clever enough to manage—Switzerland," she added softly, and he swung round on her, almost with accusation.

"How?" he said.

"How?" she parried, very innocent.

"Yes, it won't do like this, you know. And you know how I feel about—the other thing—especially after coming here today," he reflected, for he and Charles liked one another now, and there was no getting away from that.

"It will have to be like this or—or not at all," she told him flatly. "It's all we can have. Oh, my dear, I didn't promise—more. I never

promised—I—oh, Richard, can't we have—just this again? Let me come——"

"Let you come—like this time—to Switzerland? Go through all that agony of secrecy again, that ghastly pretense of not looking at you, not wanting to be alone with you——"

"But we wouldn't have to——"

"It got so I daren't speak to you, before the others—I daren't speak of you, to them—I daren't even hear your name, without wondering if they wouldn't guess, if I wouldn't give myself away! After that day at Amalfi I went round feeling as though you must be written all over me, for everyone to see! I wouldn't live through it again for anything in the world—I'd be a nervous wreck! Who knows but I should come to hate you——"

"Richard——!"

"I mean it, Cicely. After all, is this just one of those shipboard flirtations—or isn't it? Were we just—amusing ourselves—passing the time—or is it something too big for both of us? That's what it comes to, isn't it! Just how much is it worth?"

"Richard—I never saw you like this before—you——"

"Nor I you. Please don't be angry—I'm trying not to be. A time like this was bound

to come—it's the world pressing in on us again. The idyl's over. It won't come again. It never comes again. And that's why I'm saying that either you must chuck this—" His eyes swept the Grange wincingly. "—all of it, and all that it means—forever——"

"Sh!"

"Oh, I don't care, *he* knows! He can't help knowing why I'm here. He knows it's because I couldn't bear to let you out of my sight, just yet! I'm not fooling him, not for one moment. He knows I'm in love with you——"

"Richard, please——"

"Yes, James Mortimer might hear!" His voice was quiet enough for all its vehemence. "Well, let him! It will only give him one thing more to worry about! I've an idea that he's none too happy about the great Gordon as it is!"

"Whatever do you mean?" Obviously she had not an idea what he meant.

He flung out a reckless hand toward the door.

"Oh, my God, Cicely, didn't you *see?*"

"See what?" she said blankly.

"That girl!" he blurted. "They're in love, too—like us. Couldn't you *see?*"

Cicely's incredulous stare melted at once into indulgent laughter.

"My dear boy, you don't understand. Nancy's adored him, of course, ever since she was a small child. But Charles——"

"Charles adores her," he insisted doggedly, "just as I adore you. Anyone can see that!"

"Richard, you preposterous person!" She was still indulgent and genuinely amused. "You dare to stand there and tell me that my husband is in love with Nancy?"

"I do, my dear—I do," he said, with puzzled, watchful eyes.

"You're quite mad," she replied, unruffled.

"Would you—mind?" he cried, incredulous in his turn.

"Of course I'd mind!" she cried, impulsively honest. "Oh, well, that is—oh, don't be silly!" she broke off, with the first touch of impatience.

"Why?" he insisted, standing very still in the middle of the room. "Why aren't you glad? That might solve things for us—if he was in love too. Why aren't you glad, Cicely?"

"Because Charles is——"

She hesitated. Because Charles was hers. All these years he had been hers; the best-looking, most successful, least troublesome

man she knew. Of course he bored her, but that was because he wasn't in love with her, wasn't even jealous. Long ago she had given up trying, out of pique or curiosity or sheer naughtiness, to make Charles jealous. Charles couldn't be drawn. Even the Frenchman had been dismissed unemotionally, and largely because he was becoming ridiculous. Charles was scarcely human. The House of Commons was his mistress—and for her the Grange had been very like a lover, reflecting her beauty and framing her poise and enshrining the pleasant, easeful existence her marriage had become. Herself, she had required also many small exciting sallies into what in her ignorance she had once called love—in those dark ages before Richard. But Charles—Charles was headed for the Cabinet. And for fourteen years he had been hers.

Richard stood looking at her helplessly—so blonde she was, so bland, so remote and exquisite again, and so unlike the unkindled, melting Cicely he loved. Here was Charles Gordon's wife again, as Richard had first known her—arrogant in her beauty, a little patronizing, wholly impervious. He felt his Galatea slipping away from him, back into the

cold marble from which she had been so patiently chiseled. . . .

Impulsively he strode to her and caught her wrist in his tense young fingers.

"Cicely—look at me—suppose I'm right, after all! Suppose he is in love with her! Then would you——"

She broke away from him nervously.

"Do be careful!" she bade him, with a glance at the open door.

He watched her move away down the long, beautiful room—watched her against her rightful background as he had often tried to imagine her, the cool, prudent lady of her husband's house. And his heart went sick and numb within him as he looked.

Over.

It was all over, then, lost in the terrible reality of things, engulfed in habit, defeated by the little samenesses and obligations which left him outside, a stranger. The Grange had made her its own again. Here was where she belonged, so unalterably that the idea of change coming from Charles' direction unsettled her beyond her bearing.

But even in his misery he was wise enough, this Richard, to know that it was not Charles the man that held her against her love for him-

self, so much as Charles the groove. The Grange in all its beauty was nothing more nor less than a rut. Already she was back in it. He had foreseen this, and so he never doubted that she loved him, nor entertained the thought that she might love Charles more. Indubitably she loved him—Richard—but not enough.

"I was afraid of this," he said, very low. "I'll go now, I think. It's—good-bye."

"Richard——"

"You can say that I telephoned to Aylesford—and they persuaded me to come straight on, in time for luncheon—" He turned, very white, and made blindly for the door. "I should have done that—anyway——"

*"No!"* The word was sheer panic, so that he paused involuntarily while she skimmed down the room to him, till her fingers caught jealously at the roughness of his coat, and clung. "No—*no*—Richard, what's happened to us—are we quarrelling? What have we said to one another? Oh, what a fright—" she was murmuring, close to him, not looking in his face "—what a fright—you gave me——"

"But it won't do, Cicely—I might have known—I can't stay, please, if you don't mind, I——"

"Richard, I—I'll come to Switzerland——"

"My dear——!"

"I must—I've got to come—don't ever do a thing like this again, will you—don't ever say—" Her hand was laid absurdly on her heart—so much sound human reaction lies behind so much that has become melodrama.

He stood very still, his arms at his sides.

"Look at me, Cicely."

Reluctantly her face lifted to him. There was no doubt now about what he saw there.

"You'll come—forever?"

"I—must come."

"Forever?"

"Forever."

They stood a moment motionless, her face lifted to him, his hands empty at his sides. It was the first pledge she had made him, wrung from her at last by her terror of that word *good-bye*.

Then they spoke again, in whispers—

"Now you must go," she whispered. "We can't face them now. I'll think of something to make it right at luncheon."

"Shall you tell him?"

"I—don't know. Perhaps. Or I can say—just a holiday in Switzerland. He's used to that."

"Come with me—now."
"I can't—my things—they're all here."
"I have to sail on Monday, you know."
"I'll follow. Not the same boat. Soon."
"Geneva?"
"Yes."
"Soon."
"I'll write tonight. To the club."
He went, without another word.

## V

FOR a moment Cicely stood looking round the morning-room. She had betrayed the Grange at last. And still it smiled on her, the sun streaming through its windows, and across the brave, marching blue of Charles' delphiniums. . . .

Thoughtfully she climbed the great oak staircase, laying a caress as she passed on the famous newel-post which showed a jagged splintered line beneath its polished surface—where it had been broken in a little quarrel which began with the name of a Stuart king and ended in the ring of seven murderous swords. Up past the grandfather clock on the broad landing, noticing as she went that it ticked again—it had been silent when she left two months ago. Two months. . . .

Along the sunlit southern gallery she went, past unsmiling portraits of early Georgian Gordons, to her own bedroom, where two queens had slept. It overlooked the garden—not a Dutch garden, nor a sunken one, nor

were there outlandish foreign plants in it, this old English rose garden with the petal-pinked sun-dial in the middle of it.

She stood at her window looking down at the garden in the sun, while it blurred before her eyes. Well, she had burnt her bridges now. She had promised Richard, as she had so long evaded doing. She could never take back her words, irrevocably uttered in the panic of losing him, never hurt him so cruelly as to back down now. She saw his face behind her tears—young, with tragic eyes because of all the things he had endured and gone without in his short life, and that half starved look around his jaw. Nothing mattered, not even the Grange, beside that face that she loved. He had jerked her alive, against his will and hers; he had taught her to cry and had made her laugh till it ached—the Grange had only numbed her.

She wanted recklessly to be alive while there was still time. Without Richard she was just a stick. But life with him would be a gay and perilous business. . . .

When she could see again, Charles and the Prime Minister were strolling together in the garden beneath her window. Mortimer had linked himself possessively to Charles' arm,

and Charles went sedately, his expressive feet scuffing a little at the smooth turf. All Charles' emotions got into his slim, humorous feet, while his body, so perfectly balanced was it, pretended not to notice.

The drive to the station had been an almost silent one. All arguments and importunities had failed him, and his ridiculous lack of personal conceit added to his inarticulacy. He felt that he could not bear many more Richard Nevilles. And he had no right, he told himself, to think that he could make Nancy happy. Why should she love him, at the end of fourteen years? Cicely didn't. And he was too old for Nancy, reason said, too new to loving. And yet—and yet. He had never kissed Cicely like that. . . .

The chauffeuring idea still revolved obstinately in his mind. Something to remember, as he neared a decorous grave. One small indiscretion to go on with. Surely he had earned that much. Cicely had so much fun. At least he might wangle as much of life as that. And so he was silent, turning over ways and means. . . .

"I told you," said Nancy, thinking of Cicely's pretty kiss which had burned either cheek, "how it would be when she came home."

"I know," said Charles, thinking of Richard Neville. "But after all—" He stopped, unwilling to let this Neville's name follow all the rest. It wasn't fair. Cicely wanted smacking.

"It'll have to be good-bye, Charles—I'm not coming again, like this."

"The punishment," he said, tight-lipped, "is out of all proportion to the crime."

"Charles, I won't be kissed in holes and corners! It isn't good enough!" The words were sharp with their own pain.

"I never meant to," he muttered, desperately wounded, but wise enough to know she had not intended to stab.

"I don't mean this morning—I mean in future. That's what it would come to, if we tried to go on—and gradually we'd get more careless, till sometime we got caught out. Or gradually we'd drift into—into bedrooms!" she finished with a gasp, and he flashed a glance of sheer astonishment at her averted face.

"I wonder," he allowed himself to say.

"It's not a thing to fool with," she said sullenly. "Not with us. And I won't have it spoilt."

He pondered.

"Mayn't I even come to the cottage, then?"

"No. Yes. Oh, what's the good!" Her voice broke. "Besides, if you did—Mummy would get to know, somehow. I couldn't bear that."

"Couldn't you?" he murmured.

"You see—I have to live with Mummy. And I couldn't live with anybody looking sympathetic and trying to make it up to me. Mummy's sentimental. She'd fuss. I'll go it alone, thanks."

"You can't!" he said, and struck the wheel. "You shan't!"

"I can. People can do anything." Youth spoke.

"I'm going to chuck it," he announced without heroics.

"I won't let you! Charles, we've had that out once. Promise."

"I promise nothing! What is so important as you! Look at Cicely, after all! Her pride, you said—well, what of that? She'll console herself!"

"Charles!"

"Well, it's no good pretending she won't, is it?"

"And Mortimer?"

"I know. That's bad. But he'll live through it."

"Charles, you're not to upset the apple-cart while I'm away. Do you hear?"

"And when you come back?"

"We'll have got some sort of grip on things, I hope. We can have tea at some safe, hideous place like the Carlton and—make up our minds to it."

"I've an idea I'll see you before then," he said darkly, and berthed the car with a flourish beside the station. "I ask you, could Rogers have done that better?"

"Charles—don't let's make things any harder, whatever we do!"

"Things could scarcely be worse." His fingers closed on hers as she stepped out.

The train was in sight, and there was a dash to the booking-hall. He settled her alone in a first-class carriage and touched her shoulder briefly, under the eyes of guards and villagers who watched for a word from him, a local idol.

"So long," he answered her upturned, wavering smile.

She caught a last glimpse of him walking hatless along the platform. He did not look back.

Strolling beside James Mortimer in the garden now, Charles scuffed, because his mind was only half attentive to the Prime Minister's

words; because Nancy's face under the small, turned-back hat had been white and tragic; because Richard Neville's eyes were dark with a misery beyond his years; because Cicely in her serene confidence had never looked more made for cherishing than this morning; and because Mortimer was old and should not be made unhappy at the end of a long, grand life.

Almost the last of his mighty breed, was Mortimer, one of the passing Olympians. People were afraid of him, and rightly, for he had a heavy hand with miscreants. Charles he regarded as the son and heir of his strange celibate existence. He spoilt Charles. And rightly. Cicely, because she belonged beautifully to Charles, could do no wrong. Besides, he admired a pretty woman for her own sake. Nancy he had scarcely looked at twice—a gangling girl with big eyes—Johnny's playmate—negligible in her youth and inexperience.

Looking down at them from her bedroom window, Cicely saw the Prime Minister pause and pluck a pink rose, and put it in his buttonhole, talking all the while; saw Charles absently pluck one too, and stand turning it in his fingers as he listened. And she knew that that one was for her, with his unfailing, un-

ironic gallantry—a gesture, one of the many graceful gestures on which their decorative life together rested. Dear funny Charles. She wondered with a pleasant sort of compunction what would become of him, after . . . He had been hers so long.

Richard's amazing allegation concerning Nancy, which had been half lost in the near quarrel it had given birth to, reoccurred to her now. She considered it, dispassionately. Charles, straying from their mutual path as she had so often strayed, more from boredom or curiosity than from any real desire for her freedom? Funny, foggy Charles, thinking seriously of somebody at last—anybody—much less Nancy? Charles, discovering on his own account what had finally been revealed to her? Charles—consoling himself? Oh, no. Most unreasonably—no. The privilege was hers. Besides, Charles was an M.P. They never lost their heads.

But after she had gone——?

"Oh, well—" shrugged Cicely, dog in the manger. "We can't have everything!"

Thoughtfully she washed her hands and powdered her nose and added a dab of jasmine, and descended to the garden.

They watched her coming across the lawn to

them, the sun on her pale hair, the long lines of her flowing like the sculptured movement of a woman in a frieze. They stood still by the sun-dial and watched her, both of them, with pleasure.

And when she had come near enough——

"Catch!" said Charles, and tossed the pink rose into the cupped hand she held for it.

She hid her lips for a moment against its petals. This man whom she would ruin. . . .

Mortimer received her affectionate kiss with an air of fatherly pride. She was a lovely thing! Lucky Charles. So many men, deserving the best, married something not quite good enough.

"It's nice to find you here," she said, and meant it, with his kind old eyes upon her, even while her conscience, or whatever it was, withered with the knowledge of her impending wickedness. Dear old Mortimer, what a fuss he was bound to make when he knew!

"Charles asked me down to see a sick clock," he was explaining happily.

He liked doctoring clocks. He liked their busy ticking and the neatness and shine of their machinery, and their strange, diverse voices. He found something secretive and fascinating about the blandness of their faces,

apparently so open, so plain, with the pointers going round—and all that miracle of mechanism behind, and the recurrent beauty of the chime. Clocks were like people, he had found. The faces all so similar—twelve hours; eyes, nose, mouth—and so much going on behind. But you could always pry the lid off a clock and apply a magnifying glass—which administered to the Olympian in him.

Faintly through the open windows of the house came the hour-chime of the grandfather clock, convalescent, striking one o'clock on the stairs.

"Listen," said Mortimer with simple pride, and they heard it out to the end, all three standing motionless as it found them, hypnotized by the inexorable beat of its slow music. "There, Charles," he said, when it had finished. "I told you. Five pounds, please, and expenses."

"Will you take a cheque, sir?" It was one of their jokes.

"No. I want a five-pound note, with your signature on it!"

"But I thought that signature business was all superstition," remarked Cicely, obligingly.

"It is." Mortimer peered at her fondly. He had forgotten to take off his reading-specta-

cles. His long sight was as good as it ever was, and the spectacles interfered with it, but he didn't know he had them on. "Let's have a look at you, my girl. You're an optimistic soul, Charles."

"Yes. But how now?"

"To let anything as lovely as that run about by itself while you poke at home in serene confidence that she will always come back to you. I suppose that's why she always does!"

"I suppose that's it," smiled Cicely valiantly, above a sinking heart. They had fooled Mortimer for fourteen years. If God was good she could get through one more day.

"Women are beyond me," announced the Prime Minister.

"I hadn't noticed it, sir," murmured Charles discreetly.

"Be that as it may," continued Mortimer in some haste, "Charles looks fairly fit, don't you think so?"

"He always does!"

"You're right. A man's got no business to be as healthy as he is," observed Mortimer plaintively. "A little indigestion now and then is incumbent on the best of men. Did you have a nice holiday, wherever it was you went this time?"

"Italy, mostly. Splendid, thanks."

"Glad to be home again?" the friendly inquisition went on.

"Very." Her eyes went lovingly round the rose garden. Home! Yes, it was the Grange she felt unfaithful to, rather than to Charles.

"Time you came home. Even I can't console Charles forever. There seems to be something about you, Cicely, which I lack. I suppose you mean to perch a while, now that you're here?"

"Well—" she temporized. Now was the time to break the news of that holiday in Switzerland, from which she would never come back. Casually, like this, walking in the garden, not too closely observed as she spoke. That is, unless she meant to tell Charles the rest of it—unless she had the courage to give Charles a chance to stop her—unless . . . "I was thinking a little of just popping over to Switzerland—" she heard herself saying. (Coward!)

*"Where?"* snapped Mortimer, and Charles looked round at her, oddly, she thought.

"It seems so silly to always go to Switzerland in the winter," she explained carefully to Mortimer, "when it's so much lovelier at this time of year—with flowers—on the mountain

slopes—instead of snow, you know—and little goats——"

"Charles, did you know anything about this?"

"No," said Charles, his eyes on her face. (Did she suspect anything? Had she guessed? Was something back of this? His guilty conscience was so new, it was bound to crop up everywhere.)

"Upon my word, you do take one another much too much for granted, you two!" exploded Mortimer, thoroughly upset. "Here's Charles hasn't laid eyes on you for two months, and all you think of is little goats—they're called kids, I believe!—in Switzerland! I'd put my foot down if I was Charles, I swear I would!"

"I never interfere, sir." (If she was going now—if she went soon—how much easier for him to get away on the mysterious business he contemplated! Something skipped in his left side. His heart was now childishly set on that preposterous holiday which had begun as just a silly half dozen words and was to end in the very shadow of the gallows. If Cicely went on a holiday now—so would he. If Cicely could have good times where and how and as often as she pleased—so could he. . . .)

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"But you *should* interfere," said Mortimer fretfully. "You're much too casual about these things, both of you! Your intimate friends understand, of course. But if this goes on and on at this rate, it will begin not to look well. People will begin to say things."

"Oh," remarked Cicely softly, with downcast eyes. (Charles was looking very queer, wasn't he? As though he was waiting for something. Did he suspect? Had he guessed? Thank God she had got Richard safely away, if Charles was going to turn observant! Of course Charles never made scenes, but it might have been awkward, at luncheon, if Charles had discovered that Richard was so different. A twinge of something as near to conscience as she had ever come, pinched her heart. Charles ought to have a sporting chance at least. Even though he didn't love her as he might, he had much to lose by her going. She meant to go. But it was beastly luck if he really cared about his Ministry. Perhaps, after Mortimer had gone—perhaps, before she wrote to Richard tonight, she ought to tell Charles—one could hardly—just walk out . . . )

"As a matter of fact," said Charles, rather jerkily, she thought, "I've got to run up to

Edinburgh for a few days next week. It might stretch to a fortnight. So if you went right away," he added without looking round at her, "we might get back here about the same time."

"Yes," she agreed faintly. (Why Edinburgh? There wasn't any shooting now, in Scotland. It wasn't near his constituency. Why Edinburgh? Well, why not? He had an uncle there, who kept making wills and never died. It might be Uncle Bruce again, with a new codicil. She could ask Charles later. But did she want to know? So easy to be a coward, if he went to Edinburgh next week . . .)

Johnny came out on the terrace, looked about, and waved his arms at them. They waved back vaguely.

"I suppose it's none of my business," grumbled Mortimer, "but I think all this gallivanting should be put a stop to. It's all very modern and broadminded and cheery—but I say it's got to stop somewhere. And just because Charles happens to be of a more or less monogamous temperament, Cicely, is no reason——"

"*Mr. Mortimer*—not before the children!" murmured Cicely, as Johnny approached them, grinning, across the lawn.

"I say, did you hear the clock, sir?" he shouted at Mortimer.

"We did."

"Beautiful!" said Johnny. "But three minutes slow," he added, brushing away the roses in order to consult the sun-dial. "By the way, Cicely, isn't luncheon *ever?*"

"One-thirty, pig—as usual."

"Well, but don't you think if we all went in and stood in a row and looked hungry that Higgins might——"

"A very good idea," said Mortimer, starting off briskly.

Johnny fell into step with him. But Charles and Cicely lagged behind, strangely linked by their secret mutual guilt, subconscious allies against Mortimer's penetrating affection.

"Who else is here?" she asked idly. "And where are they?"

"The Kennedys and the Stephensons. Playing golf, I think. Should turn up for luncheon. Poor old Stephenson is still pretty seedy."

"What a pity. The Grange ought to do him good." Her eyes caressed it, from chimney-pots to emerald turf.

"I hoped so. Anyway, I felt rather dull, and asked them all down for the week."

"You felt dull?" She glanced at him in surprise. "You don't look dull," she commented.

"That was last week."

They paced on slowly, in their habitual silence, where each allowed the other his own thoughts.

"Got a cigarette?" she said then.

"Think so." He produced his case. "And the Mediterranean succeeded in amusing you?" he suggested, applying his lighter at the right moment.

"Very much." Smoke curled prettily round her head in the still air.

"And what were you up to this time?" he inquired, with just that touch, that light touch of affectionate interest which made him so pleasant to talk to and so nice to confide in, up to a point, for he was divinely unexacting about one's replies.

She noticed again that he always managed to sound as though he really cared what she had been up to—almost as though he had been sitting at home in conjugal loneliness, wondering. Clever Charles. But never an awkward question. You could tell or not, as you chose. Usually not. But this time——

"And you?" she parried hastily, putting off that choice this time.

"Nothing new," he shrugged, and lighted his own cigarette. (Nancy new? Nancy had been going on forever. Besides—that had to wait. For what? How long? Well, at least till he had seen her again. With any sort of luck, he would see her next week . . .)

"You know, Charles, I am convinced that you have the most perfect manners in the world."

"Because I know what to do when a lady asks for a cigarette?" His lighter closed with a derisive click.

"Because you know what to do when your wife surprises you."

"Did you, my dear?" (Richard Neville had. Richard Neville was not quite the usual thing. But he was only a new link in an apparently endless chain. Did she think she had never brought home a young man before?)

"You weren't expecting me today—were you?"

"I never expect you," he said gently. "I only anticipate."

She smiled at him hazily through the smoke. Giving himself airs, was he! Pretending to understand, or at least—had he stressed the

double meaning?—anticipate his wife! As if any man could do either, and Charles, with his sublime and touching monogamous ignorance of women least of all! How nicely his hair grew, she thought critically with one of her sidelong glances, and how he kept his figure. Charles should have been properly loved by somebody. He deserved it. He was one of life's lost opportunities.

They might have done so well together, she and Charles—where had they gone wrong? A long time ago—she couldn't remember—no good going back to that now. But what a husband he would have made some other woman! Doubtless that was true of most of them. What a game, for some Olympian holiday—to shuffle all the marriages one knew, to a new deal. And how much real good might be done that way!

She mused, behind her cigarette.

"What's become of your young man?" he was inquiring, as he scuffed along beside her.

"Oh, yes—I forgot—he rang up his aunt at Aylesford and she begged him to come in time for lunch—he left his respects, apologies, whatever you like, to you—" Her voice trailed off in smoke.

"Quite all right," he said, his mind not on it.

(They came and went and came again, like that.) "Nice boy. What's he do?"

"Travels, mostly."

He lifted quizzical brows. It was not a life which appealed to him.

"As a regular thing?"

"More or less. It's his job. Or was. The Company has promised him something in the London office in the autumn."

"What Company?" he asked idly.

"The steamship company. Oh, I thought I'd told you—he was the courier on the cruise."

"The what?" he asked blankly, after a moment.

"Well, the—whatever you like to call it—he takes care of all the shore parties and looks out for the old ladies' luggage and gets blamed for everything."

"The courier," repeated Charles thoughtfully, and hung a moment on one foot, dazed by the impact of an idea. "And when on duty, as it were, did he happen to wear a claret-colored uniform?" he wanted to know absurdly then, prompted by the Recording Angel, who never lets a man off once he has spoken foolishly.

"Uniform? Of course not! What an idea! Don't be a snob, Charles. Lots of nice people

have to earn their living in queer ways nowadays. Look at Nancy, going as paid companion!"

"Yes," he said, and smiled.

"You really must move with the times, even if you are in Parliament!"

"I do," he assured her. "I shall." (Sometimes chauffeurs looked rather nice, did they! Well, why not? Cicely's gentleman courier entitled Nancy to something rather special in chauffeurs. It would want a bit of managing, but what a lark!)

"By the way," said Cicely into the silence, "I still want to go to Switzerland—next week."

"Oh, don't mind Mortimer," he answered easily. "He loves to worry. We won't say any more about it while he's here. I've got to be away anyway," he added, and neglected to ask just how long she meant to stay.

Charles was preoccupied at luncheon. There was a busy week-end before him. A conference with Rogers, and a careful inspection of the new Daimler; a session with road maps and A. A. guide books; and some sort of story to tell his own chauffeur. Edinburgh would hardly do for Rogers, from whom he wanted so much advice and information. He was

finding it more difficult to account to his chauffeur for his movements than to his wife. The spirit of some pleased sporting ancestor bent to him from the past—a wager! Rogers would permit that. He had long suspected the unsmiling Rogers of a very thoroughgoing sense of humor. Now he would know.

That evening Cicely had a headache and went off to bed quite early. Charles rose to open the drawing-room door for her, under Mortimer's eyes—she smiled at him a little guiltily, and went away to write her letter. Obviously, one could not tell him before all the others. She never came down to breakfast. At luncheon everybody would be catching trains. Perhaps at tea time tomorrow, if he had not already gone to Edinburgh, there would be an opportunity. . . .

# PART TWO

## DUSK AT THE INN

# I

THE *George and Crown* squats squalidly a half mile off the main road between Rochester and Canterbury. It is reached by a deceptive turning too well marked for its cartographical insignificance.

Near the turning a faded fingerboard promises *Teas and Refreshment,* so that any unwary traveller is likely to bear to the left instead of keeping straight on. Late in May of last year, during the repair of a small modern bridge on the main road just beyond, a fresh board marked *Road Closed* deflected an unusual amount of traffic past the doors of the inn, and caused the hopeful erection of a petrol pump across the way.

The *George and Crown* is not old enough to be picturesque, nor new enough to be sanitary. Its vine-clad red brick exterior creates a certain illusion of mellowness which is quickly dispelled by the stale oil-cloth in the entry, the hideous late Victorianism of the dining-room, and the indescribable smell partaking

of beer, plumbing, humanity, mice, and the cabbages of yesteryear which pervades inns of its class throughout England.

It exists on the edge of a too primitive village which has somehow attracted to itself the alluring name of Safferton Medway without even a riverbank to show for it. The inn apparently depends for a livelihood on its local bar trade and a vast incuriosity concerning its occasional transients, who are mostly of a type which prefers not to have its affairs too closely observed. Possibly the *George and Crown* has even attained a certain reputation for minding its own business.

In chilly rainswept dusk, with a vicious wind round the corners, it becomes a place with very little to live for and scant reason for being.

On such a day last May a new Daimler crawled into the courtyard and came to a full stop, where the roof of the lean-to garage jutted out below the grubby back windows of the inn. One car was already abandoned in the shed—a doubtful Citroën, carelessly parked in the middle of the space.

The Daimler died abruptly, half in and half out of the shelter, its direct path barred by the shabby Citroën. Its chauffeur, very smart in

a claret-colored livery with silver buttons, stepped out into the dripple from the roof, avoiding a puddle, and opened the door of the tonneau.

He was greeted by a voice heavy with sarcasm, but with a tingle of humor behind it.

"Must we stop here, Gerrard?"

He stood a moment, looking in at the two women in the tonneau; stood very trim, very correct, and full of concern for their comfort—a chauffeur to dream of—with little dark driplets spattering down on his cap and mud threatening his shiny black leggings. His eyes were hidden by the visor. His voice was without a smile.

"I'm afraid it's the best I can do, madam. You can get tea here, I think, while I attend to the car."

"What's wrong with the car?"

The girl in the far corner spoke softly, peering out at him through the gloom. Neither of the women had made any move toward tea.

"It's a new car, miss—and fussy."

"I should think it could have been properly tested."

"It's not the car's fault, miss—something in the feed-pipe, I think."

"Will they know what to do at the garage?"

"I hope so, miss." He turned toward the older woman again, his eyes in shadow, his voice low and wheedling. "If you'd care to come inside, madam—the teas are often quite possible in these places."

She twisted round to look through the back window of the car at all that was visible of the *George and Crown* through the rain. The inn's rear was entirely without pretenses.

"Sure to be beetles in the kitchen," she prophesied grimly.

"You'd be more comfortable inside, madam," he insisted in his gentle voice.

"What do you think, Nancy? Shall we go in?"

"I suppose we might as well, really." The girl sighed and stirred in her corner under the rug. Her eyes bored toward him again, through the dusk. "How long shall we have to wait—Gerrard?"

"I really couldn't say yet, miss. Not more than an hour, I hope, if I can get a man to come over from the garage—" He laid efficient hands on the rugs and began to unwrap them.

"Provided there is a garage," remarked Nancy, her eyes on his busy profile.

His silence was a polite rebuke.

"Bring my dressing-case, too, Gerrard." Mrs. Martin came to life with brisk resignation. She was never displeased for long, because the world in general amused her. This is the only kind of person it is possible to travel with, though Nancy through inexperience hardly appreciated her luck. "There won't be any soap, nor a mirror you can see your face in. We'll take a room upstairs and make ourselves as comfortable as possible. A rug too, Gerrard."

"Very good, madam."

He lifted out the dressing-case, and laid a folded rug expertly across his arm. In his mere presence there was the luxury of well-trained solicitude and care. Seen as a background to Gerrard's loving-kindness, the inn became less hideous. He would look after them, and cosset and spoil them, even there.

"Find out if there isn't some kind of sitting-room we can have to ourselves," directed Mrs. Martin confidently. "Tea in a bedroom here would be hideous, and the dining-room will smell."

"Yes, madam." He placed his free hand in its black driving-glove at her disposal. "Will you come inside now?"

His bent arm sagged under her weight as

she got out—a well made woman in the hearty fifties, who knew how to enjoy her money. The girl followed, her fingers barely brushing his cuff.

Expressionless, efficient, carrying the rug and the dressing-case, he preceded them across the puddly yard and held open the door into a passage.

The air of the yard was chill as only an English May can be, with a paralyzing discomfort that reaches the bone as no honest winter weather can do. In the passage the atmosphere was clogged with a thrice-breathed clamminess of many unventilated seasons where no sun could ever penetrate.

"Phew!" said Mrs. Martin as she entered. "Beer! I want to go upstairs, it's going to be even worse than I thought. Gerrard, I must have a sitting-room."

"Very good, madam."

He strode competently ahead of them down the passage and into the office, where a starveling tweeny was adding to the general horror of dampness by mopping up the floor.

She was moist to the knees and elbows, and her faded blue cotton apron was not fresh. A sort of cap had slid back on her straight dark

hair above a sharp white face with large, un-English eyes—a heritage from some long-forgotten, unguessed Gypsy grandsire.

Kneeling just inside the door, she was almost stepped on, and her slow gaze travelled dully up the black leggings which had halted abruptly beside her—up past the dressing-case and the silver buttons to the face of Charles Gordon, M.P., looking down at her, shadowed by the visor of the chauffeur's cap.

There it rested, while he spoke.

"Are you in charge here?"

"Mr. Jepson's in the bar, sir."

She gave him the "sir" instinctively, crouched there on her heels looking up at him, a dreadful cloth drooling from her reddened hands.

"The ladies want a private sitting-room for an hour, and some hot water and tea. Is there a sitting-room upstairs?"

"There's the writing-room."

"Is anyone using it?"

"Not today. The room next to it is booked."

"But surely you've got an empty bedroom as well, somewhere near it."

"There's a double room across the passage, sir. Would they be stopping the night?"

"No," said Mrs. Martin with decision, from

the doorway. "But we want a place to rest in and freshen up, while the car is being seen to."

"Yes, ma'am." The little maid got wearily to her feet, plopping the horrid cloth back into the unspeakable pail on the floor. "I'll tell Mr. Jepson—he's in the bar——"

"If you'll just show the ladies upstairs at once, I can arrange all that with him afterwards," said the chauffeur, with quiet authority.

She hesitated, and her slow dark gaze returned to the shadow beneath the visor of his cap. It was not usually her place to let people have rooms, but without a word she swerved toward the stairs, drying her hands on the dim blue apron.

"This way, I think, madam."

He stood aside to let them pass, and then followed with the rug and the dressing-case—walking lightly up those musty stairs and into the kink in his destiny. Yet if Mr. Jepson had not been in the bar and had witnessed the arrival of this party of three—an idle speculation, for it appears that he was always there.

Up badly carpeted, smelly stairs with a dark turning, to a narrow passage of many doors—the little maid opened one of these which had

peeling black letters on its imitation oak surface, a fold of her apron between her hand and the knob.

It was the *soi-disant* writing-room, with an empty hearth, and in front of the window two rickety little tables, bare of note-paper. A few broken down easy chairs with hopeless chintz covers stood about unsociably.

"I could bring you tea up 'ere, ma'am," she offered, but she looked to the chauffeur for approval.

She would have to make the tea herself. It was late for tea, and early for dinner—that in-between hour when tempers are short in the kitchen and orders of any kind unwelcome. But if this exotic being in silver buttons counted on her to produce tea for his two encumbrances, tea they should have, and with a bit of cake to it, lest he come in for the spleen which hunger so often generates in the mighty.

"That will be very nice," said Mrs. Martin with ponderous humor, and glanced also at the chauffeur, who was without doubt an exceptional man, taking the invisible Jepson off her hands in that cool way.

Nancy was silent, but her eyes went up and down him, and the corners of her mouth deepened.

"There's this bedroom 'ere you could 'ave if you like, ma'am."

Collecting the chauffeur and the dressing-case with one of her dark glances, the maid crossed the passage and opened the door on a bedroom best not described. Mrs. Martin knew better even than to look at it.

"Put the dressing-case in there, Gerrard. And don't lay the rug on the bed till I make sure."

"Very good, madam."

" 'Ot water, ma'am?"

"Quite. And a glass of sherry. Have you got good sherry here?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm chilled to the bone." Mrs. Martin's grim grey gaze swept the writing-room derisively. "Where does that other door lead to?"

"A double room. Like that one across the passage, ma'am. It's booked for the night. Two gentlemen."

"There's no bolt on the door."

"It locks with a key on the inside, ma'am."

"Gerrard, see if that door is locked."

Three pairs of feminine eyes followed the slim, liveried figure as it went to try the door. In all of them was shameless approval, mixed

respectively with speculation, amusement, and awe.

"It seems to be locked, madam."

"Thank God for that. And He knows where the key is! I'm not blaming you for this, Gerrard, but we could have done without the rain!"

He stood expressionless beside the locked door, his heels together, his elbows a little out.

"I'm sorry, madam."

"Did it rain on Chaucer's pilgrims too—I forget." That was the kind of mind she had. And she never nursed a grievance.

"In the very first line, I believe, madam," replied the chauffeur unexpectedly, without a flicker.

"Oh," she said, and rested her shrewd eyes on him again, while his gaze remained correctly fixed on the middle distance.

Once again his elusive likeness to somebody teased her memory, that vague familiarity about the line of his mouth and chin which had puzzled her ever since his first entrance into her sitting-room in the London hotel that morning. Again she gave it up, with a mental shrug—every man was said to have his double. One was constantly seeing resemblances.

"Well, whatever happens, I'm not going to

spend the night here," she admonished him sternly.

"No, madam," agreed Gerrard, shocked. "But if you had a fire you'd find it more comfortable than sitting in the car."

"Where's that girl?"

The little maid was waiting apathetically, her hand on the doorknob and her eyes on the chauffeur.

"Oh, there you are," said Mrs. Martin. "What's your name?"

"Bessie, ma'am."

"I always like to know people's names. Can you make a fire here at once?"

"Yes, ma'am." (Fires in May! People didn't care what they ordered! Still, he had suggested it himself, doubtless from unhappy experience of the old lady's ways. Yes, she would make them a fire, too.)

"That would help!" shivered Nancy, moving on across the room.

"Nothing would help this place short of burning it down and beginning all over again!" said Mrs. Martin with her mordant pleasantness. "Don't you want a glass of sherry, Nancy? It's probably terrible."

"No, thanks. Just some tea."

"Sherry, tea, hot water, fire," enumerated

Mrs. Martin cheerfully to Bessie. "And first of all, a fire."

"Thank you, ma'am."

She went out, dragging wearily at the handle of the door. (What a woman! She didn't envy *him* his job!)

"There's a forlorn little soul if you like!" remarked Nancy, her eyes on the closing door.

"Oh, they get used to it!" Mrs. Martin shrugged off the entire serving class. "You'd better have something in the bar as you go out, Gerrard. It's likely to be a filthy job with the car."

"Thank you, madam."

She stopped him at the door with another question.

"Have you any idea where we are?"

"It's called Safferton Medway, madam."

"The better it sounds, the worse the inns! I learned that long ago!"

"This seems to be the best inn here, madam."

"I don't doubt that! Please God we can get away from it soon! I'm not superstitious, but it's a bad beginning. You know, I don't believe this place is even respectable."

"You're quite right, madam, it's not."

"How jolly!" She eyed the gaunt room with a new interest.

"But surely we can get on at least as far as Faversham tonight, can't we?" suggested Nancy.

"All the way to Canterbury, with any sort of luck, miss. It's a clear road, once we get round the bridge."

"You don't mind driving late?" Mrs. Martin eyed him shrewdly. (Really, an exceptional man!)

"No, madam. I'm afraid you wouldn't be at all comfortable here."

"That's the difference between a husband and a chauffeur," she told Nancy. "I've had three husbands, and they all expect you to bear anything!"

"Was that all, madam?"

His conventional question followed absurdly on the total of her husbands. She eyed him again with gimlet-like suspicion—no, there was nothing in his face to suggest—still, he was undoubtedly very like . . . More maddening than a forgotten name, the original face to which his seemed twinned flickered just beyond her mental vision. That mouth—that chin . . .

While she groped, Bessie returned, kicking

open the door behind him, staggeringly balanced with a coal hod and hot water can in one hand and a glass of sherry teetering on a tray in the other.

With one graceful swoop the chauffeur bent to relieve her of the coal and the hot water can, setting them on the floor beside her. She gave him a glance of incredulous gratitude and presented the tray to Mrs. Martin.

"Well, Nancy—" Mrs. Martin lifted the glass suspiciously to the light. "—I promised you a good time. I hope it won't all be like this!"

"But I don't mind this! And anyway, it can't rain for three whole weeks."

"Oh, yes it can—and does! This is the start of our annual summer drought."

Nancy's eyes had followed the lopsided figure of Bessie as she crossed the passage with the can of hot water dragging at one hand.

"That child is overworked and underfed." She glanced at the chauffeur, who was awaiting his dismissal by the door. "Couldn't Gerrard make the fire?"

"Certainly, miss."

He knelt on the hearth under her amused scrutiny, and took up the kindling from the top of the hod. Mrs. Martin, who had not by

any means seconded the suggestion, watched him with an ever-growing interest. Not even she would have suggested that the gorgeous Gerrard should make a fire because a white-faced drudge walked wearily.

His prompt obedience to Nancy's wish looked to Mrs. Martin like the acquiescence of a gentleman rather than a chauffeur. To be sure, in these topsy-turvy days gentlemen were often chauffeurs out of sheer necessity—had Nancy been quick enough to see this and take advantage of it? What was this mutual tenderness of theirs for a little Cockney serving-wench, one of hundreds of her kind? Mrs. Martin, who dealt with charity in cheques and was one of the most kind-hearted souls in the world, had never really looked at a Bessie before. The girl was there to bring tea and make a fire—presumably she was paid and fed, and certainly she would be liberally tipped. The idea that her back might ache was a new one.

Bessie returned at once, and hovered anxiously above him. No man could make a fire properly. She noticed his nails and slender wrists, longed to relieve him of so menial a job, but dared not openly interfere with his orders, which she had heard as she crossed the

passage. That girl—showing off, she was, because he was a chauffeur and she a lady. And walking out, no doubt, with some man not half as good as he was, who happened not to have to call her "miss." Watching him at his inexpert fire building, Bessie began to hate the grey-eyed girl who gave him orders so lightly. It was Bessie's first conscious conflict with Society.

Mrs. Martin tasted the sherry and made a face.

"You're right, Nancy, it's a fire we want! Are we going to have to eat dinner here, Gerrard?"

"I hope not, madam."

"I suppose the other room is still worse."

Holding the sherry at arm's length, Mrs. Martin crossed the passage, treading firmly. A murmured "Oh, my God!" came back to them as she entered the bedroom.

*"Charles!"*

It reached the ears of the hovering Bessie in a tense whisper. Her dark, sullen gaze swung round to where the girl stood, but the chauffeur did not turn.

"Sh!" he cautioned, and bent to blow the fire.

"But, Charles, you can't go on with this—you're crazy——"

"Shut up!" he said briefly, into the fire.

Bessie's eyes went back to him with something like adoration. That was the way to talk to her. Spoilt she was. Cheek! Ordering him around, and telling him off! Charles, she said. Bessie had never known a Charles before—not to speak to, that is. She eyed him with increasing idolatry, her slow mind circling the matter. Charles Gerrard, it would be then. Bit of a swell, he was. Not at all the usual thing in chauffeurs, who were likely to call one by silly names not one's own, and either patronize or bully. Illumination flashed across her plodding mind, class conscious from birth. Of course! This Charles was no proper chauffeur. There was some sort of game on here. And with that unwelcome suspicion, a blight fell on a day which had begun to glow.

"But she's bound to guess! Charles, I must see you alone—you must go back to Town at once—you can't—you daren't——"

"Don't spoil it—please." Little flames were leaping now, and he nursed them carefully, through pursed lips. "It's perfectly safe."

*Safe.* Bessie's thin mouth tightened. What were they up to, these two? Daren't what?

What would she be letting him in for, that girl? Her fault, whatever it was. Getting him into trouble of some kind, was she—and then trying to back down on it! That was the worst of these spoilt women. No guts. Wanted to see him alone, did she! Thinking of herself, no doubt. Well, what was she afraid of? What was it they daren't do? What was her game? Bessie burned with a passionate protectiveness for the chauffeur.

"But we can't keep this up, Charles—I shall have hysterics—please let me——"

"Nancy, *will* you shut up?"

The girl swung away hastily, humming a guilty tune. Her Charles went on with the fire.

Returning with the empty glass at just that moment, Mrs. Martin sniffed the muggy air of the room incredulously. It was tell-tale with elaborate innocence.

Gerrard knelt busily by the hearth, with Bessie handing him things. Nancy stood staring out into the rain, humming a meaningless little tune. But something had been said, something which Mrs. Martin felt she was not meant to know. Nancy and the charming chauffeur—already? It was not like Nancy to get off with the chauffeur. On the first

day, too. Of course anyone could see that he was hardly the usual thing in chauffeurs. . . .

She must watch this.

Nancy, carrying on with a stranger? No, that would never do. Not Nancy. Well, then —*was* he a stranger?

The chauffeur's cap lay on the floor beside him, and his head, silhouetted against the growing firelight, teased her memory again. Where had she seen him! On the stage?—he was quite good-looking enough to be an actor —she could never remember actors, except Gerald du Maurier—and for all his engaging nonchalance, this was not Sir Gerald—nice to know at least one person that he wasn't—of course he had said he came from the travel agency, but still . . .

Grim amusement settled over Mrs. Martin's wintry countenance. Escapade? Goings on behind her back? She would see about this. She might have suspected something, the first minute she laid eyes on him. Very cool, he was. Well, they would be bound to give themselves away, sooner or later. Meanwhile, make it hot for them. Draw him out—make him give a real performance, worthy of Sir Gerald himself—he had a ready tongue, drat him!

"I'm not blaming you for this, Gerrard, but

I do think the car might have gone wrong in Rochester, where we could have been more comfortable."

"It's a Daimler, madam," he explained expressionlessly, busy with the fire.

"Are they unlucky?"

"No, madam, I wouldn't go as far as that. Just humorous, with a fine sense of drama."

"That makes two of you."

"Thank you, madam."

She looked him over mercilessly, but not without approval. He might not be a real chauffeur, but his disguise was well nigh perfect. Too perfect. That was it. He was too good to be true.

Bessie handed him the poker mutely, trying to hold him down to the business of fire-building. He would be giving himself away in no time if he went on talking like this! Surely anyone could see——

"It ought to be an eventful trip," Mrs. Martin was remarking, impersonally.

"I doubt if our luck stays in, madam."

Three pairs of eyes rested searchingly on his face, tinged with warm light from the new blaze he fostered. His silver buttons winked as he moved, his mouth and chin were grave above the neatly fitting collar of his livery.

His back had the somehow unbending, which is to say unbendable, line of the back of a servant who knows his place. His voice was deference itself, stripping the words of all but their barest meaning. And yet, and yet—unmistakably, he amused himself.

"I've done a lot of motoring in my time," observed Mrs. Martin pleasantly, "but I must say, Gerrard, I've never come across anything like you before."

(*There!* thought Bessie angrily. *She smells a rat!*)

"I suppose it all goes to show that one should never give up hope, madam."

(*Charles, Charles, you fool!* thought Nancy.)

Mrs. Martin was looking very bland.

"Is there any particular car you prefer to drive?" she inquired.

(*She'll offer him a job—one of us will giggle and spoil everything!* moaned Nancy inside herself.)

"I've always been partial to the Daimler temperament, madam."

"What does the agency pay you?"

"Four pounds a week, madam," after a hasty calculation. "And tips," he added thoughtfully.

"I'll give you five, and you can choose the car."

(*He'll marry on that,* thought Bessie, and was drowned in self-derision. Well, what if he would? Perhaps he had done so already. Well, what if he had? Perhaps even this girl had her eye on him. Girls like this, much better than this, had married chauffeurs before, not half so good. And besides—there were no chauffeurs like this one. The old lady herself had discovered that too.)

"You mean—as a permanent thing, madam?" he queried with suitable gravity, and Nancy drew breath.

"Unless you change," stipulated Mrs. Martin significantly.

"I'd like to think it over, madam." He rose from his knees, leaving Bessie by the coal hod. "Was that all, miss?"

"That's all, thanks. Do go and see to the car and get us away from here!" Nancy made a small imperative gesture, urging him out.

"If you hear screams for help it will be us," said Mrs. Martin. "I don't like the looks of this place."

"You'll be perfectly safe, madam," he assured them, and went away with his cap at the Beatty angle.

Bessie turned her head to watch the door close behind him. *Safe.* That word again.

"Isn't he sweet," remarked Mrs. Martin into the silence he left. "Almost a gentleman."

Nancy laughed, but would not be drawn.

"Don't be a snob, my girl. One never knows what one's chauffeur may have been, these days."

She would soon guess the whole thing at this rate, worried Bessie, whatever it was, she added gloomily, sweeping up the hearth. She was a knowledgeable woman, and this girl had no sense. The old one would have their secret, whatever it was, and then what would become of him? Would he lose his job? Did he need that permanent place she offered him, at five pounds a week? Was he on his uppers, as lots of fine gentlemen were, since the War, or was it just a lark? The inn did not harbor larks, as a rule. Or was it——?

Her white face sharpened knowingly. Up to something, that girl. And what would become of him?

"He's not very good at fires," suggested Nancy, without much interest.

"That's what I meant. Anyway, you

shouldn't have asked him. He wasn't engaged to build fires."

"He looks as though he had been created simply to adorn that livery!" said Nancy with a laugh, and got out her cigarettes.

"Yes, doesn't he!"

Mrs. Martin's shrewd eyes were on the girl's shadowed face. She could get nothing from it. It was certainly unlike Lillian's daughter to be involving herself with actors and people who committed escapades. Of course it might prove to be some kind of practical joke. On the other hand, he was apparently a chauffeur from an agency who was somehow not keeping his place and Nancy allowed it. Well, one couldn't have that, could one! (*Hang it,* thought Mrs. Martin stoutly, *the fellow's our sort, all the same!*)

"I keep thinking he looks like somebody I ought to know," she ruminated aloud. "Have you noticed it?"

"I don't think he looks like anyone I ought to know," denied Nancy, and the match lit up her intent face for a moment, behind her cigarette, and went out.

"It's as though you saw the Duke of York walking along Piccadilly looking just like anybody else, and yet you couldn't be sure it

wasn't the Duke of York—well, you'd worry about it all the way home, wouldn't you!"

"No," said Nancy, deliberating. "I don't think I would."

"Idiot!" said Mrs. Martin fondly.

"Of course Gerrard looks very smart, and has all his H's," conceded Nancy. "But I don't know that that's a sign of royal blood, in a chauffeur."

"Mmmmmm—perhaps not always," Mrs. Martin admitted.

Bessie, on her knees coaxing his laggard fire, scowled into the flames. Making fun of him too, in her cheeky way. Laughing at him, for having H's. Would she give him away, just for the pleasure of saying something she thought was funny? Bessie, who never thought anything was funny, had a deep-rooted mistrust of levity. What had he meant, safe? Or was the girl's scheme to pretend she thought nothing of him? Better that way, perhaps. Perhaps after all she knew what she was about? She wanted watching, though. No sense, these spoilt women with pink finger-nails.

Bessie had no time to read sixpenny novels dealing with thieves and murderings and secret societies. She lived on the edges of a per-

petual paper-backed shocker whose mysteries were never solved and which grew tiresome with repetition. Much of the crime plotted here never came off anyhow—and when it did, the news seldom filtered back to the inn. Half-told tales, all of them, hints, implications and inferences, adumbrations of evil. Bessie had never encountered the complete and beautiful felonies involving people like Sherlock Holmes.

A thorough course in servant-girl fiction might have suggested to her that a mysterious chauffeur and an innocent-looking accomplice meant to murder an old lady for her jewels. Native commonsense prevented Bessie from suspecting Mrs. Martin of jewels at all, and a jealous partisanship for the man called Charles precluded the idea of his being a crook. Bessie's premonitions took no form beyond the vague, familiar uneasiness with which the veiled intrigues of the inn so often plagued her. And she wished Charles well out of it, whatever it was.

The rain spat viciously against the windows of the writing-room on a gusty wind. It was as dismal a day as you could find in March, and this was late May. England's spartan climate was reminding its inhabitants that life

is not a bed of roses even in the summertime.

Mrs. Martin yawned.

"You know, Nancy, I never wanted to own a car and a chauffeur before. It was always less trouble to hire them by the month. But I should rather like to keep Gerrard in the family. Fancy his remembering his Chaucer like that! Wouldn't you like to know all about him?"

"You probably will, darling, if you keep on!"

Nancy dropped into a springless armchair with her cigarette as though nothing interested her overmuch at the moment, rummaged left-handedly in her handbag for a small mirror, squinted at her own face in the growing dusk, recognized the need for a powder-puff and decided not to do anything about it, returned the mirror to the bag and bundled the whole thing out of sight into the seat of the chair, which was wide enough for two of her. (Would the dear woman ever stop talking about Charles? It was really too bad of him to get her started like this with his nonsense, and then leave her, Nancy, to cope with its aftermath! Suppose Mrs. Martin were to get really on the right track of the likeness she thought she saw! Anybody might have watched Charles in the

House—you couldn't help seeing his picture in the illustrated weeklies—oh, he was mad, mad, to think——

"I'm afraid he's the reticent kind," pursued Mrs. Martin.

"Well, then, why not ask him straight out for the story of his life?" Nancy threw in, indifferently.

"If there is one, he'd never tell it. And if there isn't, he'd make up something. So what's the good?"

Mrs. Martin glanced down at mousy Bessie by the fire. Was she listening? What might she have heard, in those few minutes alone with Nancy and Gerrard? Something, beyond a doubt. Could one find out? One could not, with any sort of dignity. What a white-faced scrap it was!

"That'll do," she said kindly. "Go and fetch the tea now."

"Thank you, ma'am."

Bessie rose stiffly and scuffed across the room for the tray and glass, not picking up her heels.

Mrs. Martin yawned again, behind an ineffectual hand.

"Driving always makes me sleepy, and the fire has finished me. I'm going to have a wash

and forty winks while the tea is making. You don't mind, Nancy?"

"Of course not. I'll have a nap here, and call you when tea comes."

"I don't expect to be comfortable on that bed, but it will pass the time. Let me know if Gerrard comes back."

Mrs. Martin paused, blocking the door so that Bessie waited, tray in hand, beside her.

"I wish I could think who it is he reminds me of," she added, regarding Nancy's lax figure in the big chair. "Are you sure you never saw him before?"

Nancy blew smoke through her little nostrils.

"I'm not in the habit of hiring motor cars at eight guineas a day," she admitted. "Chauffeurs are pretty well outside my experience."

"He's not a chauffeur," said Mrs. Martin, and went to take her nap.

## II

CARRYING the empty sherry glass on the tin tray, Bessie followed Mrs. Martin out of the room.

He'd be in the bar, perhaps, with Mr. Jepson. One might catch a glimpse of him if one passed that way. Ought one to warn him that the old lady suspected something and that the girl had no sense? Oughtn't he to be advised to stick more closely to the *Yes, madams,* and *No, madams* of chauffeurdom? Apparently the harm was already done, as far as the old lady was concerned.

*He's not a chauffeur.* Was she sure? And what might discovery mean to him?

Inoculated against idle curiosity as she had been by a little lifetime of the furtive mysteries of the inn's transient clientele, hardened to the dim sense of nameless menace which pervaded many of its most casual seeming affairs, Bessie found nothing macabre in the idea of some imminent disaster to Charles.

She knew, none better, that almost anything could happen in this world, and her only wonder, if she had one, was that something didn't come off oftener, with so much on the boil.

Twilight and the back stairs had no secrets from her. And over the whole of her wretched, youthless life fell the dubious shadow of the inn, with its half-heard enigmas which were none of her business. But this—ah, this was different, for this was Charles.

The inn was no place for him. Anything might happen to him within its secretive walls. It had been very quiet now for a long time, but it never did anybody any good. The traffic coming through had aired it a bit, perhaps. That would be over soon, when the bridge was mended, and it would slink back into its usual hole-and-corner ways.

But even now, with the fringe of his precious life washed by its sinister undercurrents, he was not quite safe. The word ticked in her troubled brain. Her forgotten Gypsy blood chilled unaccountably. He must go away at once. He must not stop the night in any case. What could she say to him, what could she do, to get him away quickly? She would never see him again—what matter now how soon she lost sight of him? He was there, in her eyes,

in her unguessed Gypsy soul. He had happened. She had him, forever.

Safe.

But he had not stopped in the bar as bidden, she found. He had apparently forgotten about seeing Mr. Jepson at all. And they were waiting for their tea up there.

They were no good to him, those two. They didn't know what she knew, about the inn. They were wet and cold and dainty, and had to be fed, while he went back into the rain with the car. Well, the sooner he got it put right, the better.

Spreading clammy bread and butter, she looked out through the window of the scullery, which was below the lean-to roof and at this hour was empty except for herself. And there was Charles, crossing the yard toward the road. He had put on a dark mackintosh which came down to the neat black leather leggings.

Going to fetch the man from the petrol pump across the way, no doubt. At least he was losing no time.

A small car turned in recklessly upon him, shoving on its brakes as he dodged, and she scowled as he took the spatter from its wheels. More of them. More obscure affairs to

threaten him while he had to be here. She suppressed a wild impulse, vestige of that Gypsy grandsire, to run out to him through the rain and beg him not to come back—never to come back into the inn.

But she was English too, and she went on spreading bread and butter, while he walked on into the road.

The incoming car, a nondescript two-seater like thousands of others, nosed itself under the shelter, and a young man emerged hastily from behind its streaming curtains. Bessie, watching from the scullery window, saw that he looked first of all toward the road, where Charles was just turning the corner out of sight.

"Never you mind 'im, now," she admonished him silently. "Not *your* fault you didn't 'it 'im! Get along into the bar and 'ave your drink, then, and clear out."

But the young man, slim-waisted and Piccadilly in a belted Burberry, was concerning himself extensively with the crippled Daimler.

He looked first at its number plate and then at the luggage on the grid. A waterproof cover baulked him there. But swinging himself up on the running-board he peered through the windows of the tonneau, decipher-

ing the initials on the small dressing-case which remained on the floor. Then with another glance toward the road, empty now in the downpour, he made off across the yard for the inn door.

"Blast," muttered Bessie, dropping the bread and butter in order to intercept him in the office—Mr. Jepson being still in the bar.

"Oh," he said at sight of her, peering through the damp gloom. "I say—" His hand came out of his pocket toward her. "Can you tell me—are there two ladies belonging to that Daimler in the yard?"

She took his money, ungraciously. Something going on. Always something going on here. Seen close, he looked all right. That girl's young man, perhaps. Seemed worried about her, too. What would *he* want?

"Yes, sir. They've gone upstairs."

"Are they stopping here?" he inquired incredulously.

"For tea, sir," she said briefly.

"Well—I say, look here, I must see them—isn't there a sitting-room——?"

His eyes went fastidiously round the unventilated office, with the awful pail abandoned in the middle of the floor.

"The ladies 'ave engaged the writing-room

private for tea, sir—didn't want to be disturbed."

"Oh—that's all right—I'd like to go up, please. Look here, it's quite all right, I—they're friends of mine."

She hesitated. His evident confusion, his youth, his lack of either a patronizing or bullying air, went further than his half crown. Oh, well, at least he didn't look the wrong sort. Something told her, something more recent than her Gypsy grandsire, that he would be on Charles' side as much as she was. Keep him here then, why ever he had come, till Charles was ready to go. One of the same breed, to back Charles up in the event of that vague, forboded need. . . . A bodyguard for Charles, someone to stand by him through anything that came, and to be thrown, instead of Charles, into any breach that yawned. . . . A queer tremor went through her, under his clear blue eyes. He didn't belong at the inn either. And yet here he was, unaccountably on hand, sent by Providence in case of accidents to Charles.

Mr. Jepson would remain in the bar—the less *he* knew the better he liked it! She could smuggle the young gentleman upstairs. . . .

Her face was eerie with the effort to see

beyond him into her own unintelligible apprehensions.

"What's the matter?" he queried sharply, staring at her with those young English eyes of his. "They—they're quite all right, aren't they? There's not been an accident?"

"No, sir," she answered ambiguously. Her own gaze, opaque with that forgotten, unguessed Gypsy tragedy, slid away from his in embarrassment. "This way, sir."

He stumbled up the narrow stairs behind her, biting on a rising, unreasoning terror. Nancy—in this hole! What on earth was going on? *Could* that have been Charles in the yard? But it had to be Charles, one had eyes, and one knew every unmistakable line of him, even in those outrageous clothes, and his mouth and chin could be clearly seen beneath the visor of his cap. Charles' new car stood in the yard—with Nancy's luggage in it. But Nancy was being a paid companion, Cicely said, and Charles had gone to Edinburgh. Yet here they both were, in this hole . . .

He started and nearly yelped with nerves, at the clutch of fingers on his sleeve in the dark passage at the top of the stairs.

"Get Mr. Gerrard out of 'ere quick, sir—*get 'im away!*"

He had no time to question or reply before she opened a door in his face.

"There's a gentleman 'ere about the Daimler, miss—says 'e's a friend of yours."

"Johnny!"

## III

NANCY, left alone in the dreary room, had stretched out her hands to the fire with an involuntary shudder. The rain and the fading day pressed a vague uneasiness upon her, which seemed to exude from the very walls, a miasma from their hideous rose-pattern paper gone greenish with age.

She looked around for a light, and noticed that the only illumination provided was a naked electric bulb pendant from a cord in the middle of the ceiling. The switch was in the wall near the door, and she eyed it resentfully, too warm and relaxed in the lumpy easy chair to move, too preoccupied to care.

*He's not a chauffeur.* It might mean anything, that parting shot. Easy enough, if Mrs. Martin had got that far with it, for the whole thing to give way any minute. Mrs. Martin was a dear, one could count on her to see a joke, but one could not bear to have Charles look ridiculous before even the best of

strangers. He must get away before he was found out.

Nancy had not seen him alone since she walked out of the Grange four days ago, when she had packed a bag and escaped to Town on an invented telephone message after Johnny came burbling that Cicely was home. Impossible to face Cicely then, for more than a few minutes. Even so, she had kissed her, and smiled into her unsuspicious eyes, and felt herself a traitor and a coward.

Whatever Charles had said to Cicely since then, what lie he had invented to cover his absence, what he had done with the agency car, and how he had achieved that perfect livery, she still did not know. They had made a late, hurried start from London that afternoon after wasting the morning shopping, hoping that a grey sky would clear before sunset. Instead, it had come on to pour, the other side of Rochester. They were too far along the road to turn back to London then, and the *County* at Canterbury was known to be as comfortable an inn as England could boast anywhere.

They skipped Rochester, leaving its castle and cathedral for the return journey, and kept straight on, for Mrs. Martin coveted that fire-

side table in the dining-room at the *County,* and a late, delicious tea, with their bags unpacked and a hot tub in prospect before dinner.

Nancy, her face pressed against the streaming pane for a glimpse of the almshouse as they flashed by, had snuggled luxuriously under the rug with a childish desire to just go on like this forever—kind, funny Mrs. Martin, a watertight car, and Charles to drive it, so that one never thought of skidding or watched crossroads taken at full speed. But Charles couldn't come to tea in those ridiculous clothes. Nor could he be properly introduced.

Something would have to be done, worried Nancy, staring out at the unlovely edges of soaking Rochester, about Charles.

Meanwhile, one would arrive at the *County* with the best rooms engaged, travelling like a daughter of wealth for the first time in one's bare little life, shepherded by a person accustomed to command all such comforts as meals at odd hours and fires out of season. Mrs. Martin arrived at an hotel like a good-natured earthquake, and things were done, and done cheerfully, which had apparently never been done before.

But the new car, with rain down her neck

and waterspouts from below, began to sneeze. Charles touched her tenderly here and there on the instrument board, eased her gears, coaxed, cosseted, and was firm. She developed a piteous cough, went limpingly, and was driven into the yard of the *George and Crown* about six o'clock.

Nancy shifted stiffly in the unyielding chair, and her healthy young appetite longed for tea; good or bad, but tea. And because tea as a meal offers little scope for the imagination, her mind wandered on ahead to the possibility of a green-gage tart, with custard, for dinner, at that pleasant inn awaiting them at the end of a dismal day.

Did it always rain in Canterbury, she wondered idly, hearing it beat against the windows above the courtyard and thinking compassionately of Charles, who was getting what he pretty well deserved, down there with the car. . . . She had been to Canterbury once before; by train, third class, with her mother, who said it would be good for their souls to do without what she called luxuries for a few days in order to see a cathedral again. It had rained then, too, and they had lunched extravagantly at the *County,* but not at the table by the fire—a well-dressed, sad-looking lady

and an ecstatic child, with almost nothing in their flat purses besides the third class return tickets. . . .

They had heard the choir practicing that day four years ago—stolid men without fervor, little boys without holiness, all in their everyday clothes, opening their mouths on a divinely solemn music too often interrupted by the fretful rap of the conductor's stick. When the choir had finished, the organ went on by itself—on and on, swelling and dipping and flooding again till one's very soul turned dizzy with its beauty, and one's knees went wobbly and queer.

Her first and only organ—her first and only cathedral—by train, third class, and no sweets for days to pay for it. Worth all that, and more.

She had always meant to go back, as soon as Mummy was well enough; back to stand again at the top of the broad steps looking down the breathless vista of the North Aisle to that tall blue window at the end—*"The glass is largely modern,"* said the guide-books scornfully, disposing of all that heart-catching color in five curt words—well, what if it was, argued Nancy, uneducated in glass—everywhere you looked, those windows of varying

blueness, framed in sacred stone; back again to the Black Prince, impressive, silent, flat-faced, Plantagenet, at rest beneath his Damocles sword; back to the broad, pilgrim-worn steps, and the unpretentious Martyrdom. . . .

And now, on the whim of a generous, domineering woman, there were to be at least nine cathedrals for Nancy, one after the other—beginning with Canterbury. Fancy being paid to look at cathedrals!

But what about Charles, this couldn't go on. . . .

The fire was making her sleepy, she couldn't think properly what to do about Charles. He must be sent back, of course—but if only they might first climb the steps toward Trinity Chapel together, looking back at that tall blue window. . . .

"There's a gentleman 'ere about the Daimler, miss—says 'e's a friend of yours."

"Johnny!"

Nancy was on her feet, staring at him.

He came inside and closed the door on Bessie before he spoke. Even in the dim room, warmed to an illusive cosiness by the fire, he looked white and wretched. Things were bad enough, rasped his fretted nerves, without this too.

He had been unable to credit until now that it would really be Nancy in that room—Nancy looking young and fresh and very dear in that hideous room with its furtive air of clandestine privacy. Things that Johnny knew but dimly and had never dwelt on leaped out of the shadows at him, so that he was conscious of a sick recoil in every fiber of his young fastidiousness. It was to such places, Johnny was vaguely aware, that people came who . . . But this was Charles. And Nancy didn't know. She was looking just her usual self—startled, perhaps, instead of glad to see him, but without guilt or shame in her grey eyes. The shame was his, for having allowed such thoughts to touch Nancy even in his confused, inarticulate mind.

Nancy and Charles. Here. Together. Obviously something wrong. But obviously wrong was the wrong word.

"What *are* you doing here?" he demanded, almost crossly, for he felt that somehow they had not been fair to him in allowing him to think those things.

"We've broken down—something about the feed-pipe in the car. And what about you?" she retorted, stunned into a perfectly normal answer by the shock of seeing him here. (Had

Cicely found out, already? Was he following them, at Cicely's instigation? All her impulses scurried protectively to Charles. He was going to be sent back. They had no right to interfere!)

"I was driving down to Canterbury to find you."

He had no other answer ready. He was not prepared. He had not decided yet how he meant to begin when he found her. This unexpected meeting nearly thirty miles short of Canterbury knocked all his cues askew. His mind was still a jumble of the news he carried and his own need to get to her quickly—and it was news which should be broken carefully. Instead of his springing it on her in the best possible way, with neatly marshalled arguments and appeals, she would be dragging it out of him now all wrong end to.

But even now, he counted on her blindly. No matter how badly one put things, Nancy always understood. His eyes clung to her doggishly, dark with his own inner tumult, and trustful.

"To find *me!*" she was repeating. (Then perhaps they didn't know about Charles at all. Perhaps he would still be safe in his absurd masquerade. If only she could get Johnny

away quickly, before they could encounter one another——)

"Yes, but I nearly ran over Charles just now in the courtyard. He didn't recognize me, through the windscreen." He frowned, trying to sort things out in his mind and come at it sensibly. (Charles crossing that courtyard—dressed like that—but it must fit on somehow, to the rest—it must be all a part of the thing he had come to tell her—perhaps she already knew—) "Why on earth is he wearing those clothes?" he cried futilely.

"But why were you following me to Canterbury?" she countered desperately. (What could she say to him? Why *was* Charles wearing those clothes? To be near her on an idiotic lark! One could never tell Johnny that. One couldn't give oneself away, and Charles, to poor Johnny, casually like this, in an inn parlor, with tea coming up. Even if Johnny hadn't been in love with her, it would have been awkward enough——)

"Well, you see, I wanted to know if there wasn't something you could suggest—" He passed his hand in a pathetic gesture across his eyes. "Look here, Nancy, what *is* this, a joke? Because it isn't really funny, you know. Or at least it won't be if he should be

recognized. Do you realize you're only a few miles from the Grange?"

"I know, I know, but I can't help that!" cried Nancy wearily. "How did you know you'd find me at Canterbury?" They were neither of them quite clear about what they wanted settled first.

"I rang up your mother, of course. She said Canterbury was first on the list, and you'd naturally be at the *County*. I meant to try there anyway."

"Are you going to be a detective when you grow up?" It was all she could lay tongue to, in her confusion.

"Nancy, for God's sake, there's nothing to laugh at!" His voice broke harshly because there was so much he could not understand and they did not seem to be getting anywhere with any of it, and because she only stood there looking at him, not quite her usual self after all, but nevertheless untouched by the dim innuendoes of the dreadful room. The more one looked at it, the further the situation seemed to recede from sanity. "Are you both crazy?" cried Johnny, getting more white and wretched by the minute. "Suppose Cicely knew this! Somehow I don't think in her present state of mind she'd think it was funny!"

"It isn't meant to be funny—and Mrs. Martin is asleep in the room across the passage," she defended with dignity, while her mind rushed futilely round and round the main issue, which was why he should have come at all. "Charles and I are not here alone!"

"I didn't for a minute suppose you were!" he refuted steadily and with truth. "Charles is not altogether insane, I hope. Cicely may have lost her mind, but never Charles!"

"Cicely!" laughed Nancy at a tangent. "She's always sane enough! But your precious Charles turned up at our hotel this morning in London wearing that livery and said he was from the agency and his name was Gerrard——"

"Gerrard!" cried Johnny involuntarily.

"Mrs. Martin didn't know the difference, of course, but she's beginning to suspect something now. I——"

"But he must go back at once!"

"I know," she said again, wearily. "He's going. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow may be too late! Cicely's running away! We've got to stop her!"

"Running—?" She stared at him stupidly.

"She says she's leaving him—forever!" he

blurted tragically. "We've got to *do* something, quick! I couldn't find Charles, so I thought if only you'd come back and talk to her—but if he's here too——"

"Leaving—*Charles!*" She felt for the back of her chair, limply. (But that would mean—it meant that Charles—his name sang crazily in her head—*Charles!*——)

"I got it out of her only this morning at the Grange. I tore up to the flat in town, but they said Charles had gone to Edinburgh and they didn't know how to reach him there. So then I thought of you—" He came to sit on the arm of the chair she had dropped into, unconsciously seeking her still. "I thought perhaps you—knowing them both so well—could think of something——"

"Does she—say why she's—leaving?" She had got it out at last, through stiff lips.

"There's no secret about that!" he assured her with some bitterness, and she winced apprehensively under the lash of her own guilty conscience. "She fell in love with some blighter on the boat!"

"*She*—fell in love!" repeated Nancy, meaninglessly.

"Terribly. She's gone clean up the pole, and likes it. Fancy *anybody,* I don't care if

it is my own sister, being married to Charles and wanting to bolt with somebody else!"

"But—how did you find this out?" She was still trying to take it in.

"Well, there was that Switzerland business afoot, you know—rather fishy, now that one thinks twice about it, which of course one never would. But this morning, after everyone had gone, I caught her crying and packing and crying—imagine Cicely crying anyway! At first I tried to be tactful and not seem to notice—and then it gradually dawned on me, I don't know just how, that she was making a clean sweep of things like her writing-table, and her special books—well, as though she meant to be gone a long time——"

Johnny brushed a hand across his eyes.

Not even to Nancy could he speak of that one unforgettable picture which had broken down his brotherly reticence and forced him into horrified questioning—that memory of his sister Cicely, beautiful Cicely, standing on the bottom step of the old oak staircase with her arms around the great newel-post and her cheek against the polished wood—her wet cheek. *"Cicely!"* He had paused transfixed in the door of the morning-room. She started guiltily and stood away from the newel-post—

back against the panelled inner wall of the staircase, and her fingers spread themselves lovingly against that too. He could not remember that he had ever seen her cry before—but she stood there now, with tears on her cheeks, flushed, with her fair hair a little rumpled—beautiful Cicely. "It will never forgive me for this," she had said dully, not looking at him. "I shall be—outcast." And then he had dragged her into the morning-room and shut the door and got the truth from her.

Well, there it was—the tragedy he had run to Nancy with, making instinctively for the person who meant most to him, next to Charles, in the world, depending on a word from her, like a child crying out in the dark. He waited confidently for her incredulous horror, matching his own, and her suggestions for saving the ship.

Nothing of that sort came. She seemed to have nothing at all to say. And Johnny, who had long since passed the speechless stage, yearned for feverish action.

"It will finish Charles in Downing Street, you know—if she goes on with this," he prodded ineptly.

"I—know." Excitement raced through her again, and was stilled by an effort of her will.

She had not got as far as that—she had only thought of him as free, *free*—but he was ruined too. The thing she herself had stuck at, Cicely in her beautiful selfishness would accomplish. Charles was finished in Downing Street now. But one must not think of that—not yet—Johnny was waiting—she perceived tardily, through her preoccupation, the blind pain which had driven him to her, of all people, through the rain. A terrible jolt for him. And—more to come . . .

"No going further for him, I mean. He—might have had a Ministry."

"Did you make her see that?" she asked, out of a fog.

"I tried to. Cicely is being a beast, and I told her so, straight."

"Did you, Johnny?"

A vague idea of the scene which must have taken place between those two penetrated to her sympathy. Awful for Johnny. But what could anyone say to him now? Here he was, on her hands, a bundle of nerves and intricacies, so tortured, so *young*. And dear, funny, philosophical Charles, the whole of the past twenty years in ruins in spite of anything anyone could do now—well, what would Charles say, when he had done with the Daimler down-

stairs and found Johnny here with his incredible news?

"You do adore him, don't you?" she murmured.

"I'm on his side," he maintained doggedly. "I told her so."

Driven by conscience, she nearly spoke then, but gave it up with a sigh. Why rush about confessing things? It was not as though she funked owning up to her share in the cataclysm. What she funked was breaking Johnny's heart entirely.

She discovered with a dim surprise that in order to be tactful one would have to shirk one's rightful liabilities in this thing. How to say to Johnny, with one's native honesty—"But Charles didn't love her—Charles never loved her—because after all, Charles is in love with me—" Impossible to smash Charles like that for Johnny, who adored him and counted on him. Let Cicely take all the blame, then? Let Charles go scot free, haloed by a martyrdom he was more than willing to meet? Well, why not? If Cicely had stuck, Charles could have been made to stick. Why bring down all three of them now in bits at Johnny's feet, when Cicely alone would suffice? Why not spare Johnny as much as possible, as long as

possible, by simply lying low? It made one feel a swine, but it was kinder.

"All the same," Johnny resumed, getting a new grip on things, "if ever Charles behaved himself in his life, he's got to do it now! It's all Cicely's fault, and if she goes on with it she can take all the blame!"

"You're not very charitable, are you!"

"Charitable be hanged! I'll never forgive Cicely for letting him down. Never!"

"Poor Cicely."

"Poor Cicely!" he repeated with scorn. "To lose Charles for some cad that made love to her under an Italian moon! All the same, Charles has got to stop playing the fool! And I'm going to find him and tell him so!"

"He only wanted a holiday, you know," she put in anxiously.

"Of course I know. But something's bound to happen when people try mad schemes like this! When I think of Charles wearing brass buttons and——"

"Silver," she corrected softly.

"What?—and opening doors and getting you hung up in a filthy hole like this——"

"It wasn't his fault—the beastly car——"

"Well, he shouldn't be driving the new car!

It's not been broken in yet. Rogers wouldn't let *me* have it the other day!"

"Nobody would have recognized it but you. Besides, the petrol was dirty—no car can stand that!"

They were almost quarrelling—somebody had dared to criticize Charles.

"I know, I know!" cried Johnny sharply, his young nerves raw. "But all the same it was tempting Providence! You can't afford to do that, ever! Providence is something with a simply colossal sense of humor, and it loves to catch us out!"

"Don't croak, Johnny."

"You know I'm right! You know things like this never come off quite as they're meant to! Something's bound to go wrong, you'll go smash into somebody, or you'll run afoul of the police somehow and he'll be recognized in that kit, or you'll meet somebody like Mortimer where you least expect it! Besides——"

He broke off, confronting new horrors. Sudden memory of his fright at the door flickered through him again, after being lost among so many things. What was it that girl had said when she clutched his sleeve—*Get Mr. Gerrard out of 'ere—get 'im away!* Gerrard was Charles. What did she mean? Had

she recognized him? No. Had some one else? Anybody might recognize him any minute, from a picture in an illustrated paper or—should he tell Nancy about that girl?

"Don't have a fit, Johnny. Charles will go back to London at once, of course. Though heaven knows what he's done with the car we hired, and what can be said to Mrs. Martin now that she's adopted him! Poor Charles. It's too bad to spoil his fun."

"Charles is Charles, and he's got to go on being Charles, and that's all about it!" he declared obstinately, in words so similar to her own to Charles a few days before that she blinked at him. "It's simply too awful to think of his being caught red-handed in an escapade like this!"

"I suppose people would think all kinds of things, she reflected naïvely. "But I suppose he thought, with Mrs. Martin and all——"

"Mrs. Martin or no Mrs. Martin, if this ever comes out they'll be able to say things about him—you know the sort of beastly things—and they've never been able to before. About you, too. I do think he might have thought of that, at least! Besides—" He shivered involuntarily in the leaping shadows

of the firelight, feeling again that brief clutch on his sleeve. (What did she know, that girl? Or perhaps she was a little cracked, living in a hole like this, and made a habit of clutching people in dark passages. But—Gerrard. Why not tell Nancy, and find out if she had noticed anything about the maid—) "I say—the fact is, I had an awful shock outside just now, I——"

There was a tap at the door into the passage.

"There's tea," said Nancy. "Come in."

Good, thought Johnny. They could nab her now——

But it was Charles.

## IV

HE came in quietly, and shut the door behind him—caught out, but not minding too much because Johnny was a sportsman.

"Oh, Lord," he said grinning. "Denounce me, Johnny. How did you get here?"

"I was on my way to Canterbury," said Johnny, inadequately.

"You chose a nice day for it," commented Charles, forbearing further questions.

Johnny noticed subconsciously that he was looking much the same, too, in spite of his preposterous clothes. No matter what Charles wore, he would always be Charles. The idea of his passing for anyone's chauffeur was sheer comic opera. But for Johnny that very sameness, that complete usualness in leggings and bright buttons had a nightmare quality, now that Charles' life was being wrecked before their very eyes.

"I meant to catch Nancy at Canterbury,"

said Johnny, as though he was the one who wanted accounting for.

"I see," said Charles. "Well, here we are." He glanced round the ugly room with a quizzical smile. "Unfortunately, this isn't Canterbury—yet. Why no light?"

"It looks better in the dark," said Nancy. Her heart was beating thickly. In a minute Charles would be told. In a minute Johnny would blurt out the words that meant that Charles was free. And her whole life hung on the look that would change Charles' face, one way or another, as he heard.

"I'm still not quite clear—" Charles was suggesting, and he looked hard at Johnny. (Had Cicely found out? Had Johnny followed to protest? But Cicely was a sportsman.—A guilty conscience is a terrible thing. He had never had one with Cicely before.)

"I didn't know you were here, too—I never expected to find you at all. After that damned detour at the bridge I meant to stop off here and make sure I was on the right road and have a drop of Scotch to take the chill off. Then I saw you in the yard——"

"Was that you in the two-seater just now? You blighter, you nearly hit me!"

"Sorry, I—Charles, you've got to go back at once! It's Cicely!"

"She's not ill!" incredulously. Cicely was never ill.

"No. Only mad. She's bolting. You think she's going to Switzerland for a holiday. Well, she's just owned up that she—she isn't coming back!"

There was a moment. Then——

"Good boy—I knew he was the real thing," said Charles unbelievably, thinking first of Richard Neville. His face was clear of tragedy.

"Aren't you—going to stop her?" gasped Johnny, and Nancy sat very still.

"On what grounds?" said Charles simply.

"But she's a selfish beast to do this! I called her every name a brother can think of, it was a frightful row we had, she hated my being on your side! As if I wouldn't be! She said she did think for once I might stand up for her, and I asked her why in hell she should think that now of all times, and—" The wild defence broke in his throat. He turned away, smoothing his hair with a nervous gesture.

"All right, old man—I'll survive." Charles thumped his shoulder in passing—they did not look at one another. Charles drifted vaguely

across the room in Nancy's direction, and came to anchor near her chair. "I've no right to interfere," he added, speaking across her to Johnny's back.

"No right!" cried Johnny, whirling. "After all this time—after loving her for all these years and letting her have her own way about everything—it seems to me you've jolly well got the right to hang on to her till she comes to her senses!"

"It's not quite as simple as that," began Charles cautiously.

"It's all because of Egypt or somewhere—she lost her head out there and thinks it's love!" said Johnny, recklessly drawing an arbitrary line between the two. "But she'll get over it, and then what? She'll wish to God she was back with you where she belongs! It's you she loves, really—anybody can see that!"

Nancy sat looking from one to the other, momentarily set aside and forgotten by them as the most beloved woman can be, by men who hold one another dear. Charles had left his wet mackintosh downstairs, and his livery was comparatively immaculate still. Johnny's shoulders were damp and his uncovered hair had crisped childishly with the weather. A handsome lad, appealing, honest, and tragic as

only the very young can be—but it was Charles she wanted. Charles, who was smiling with a queer compassionateness, not liking the things he was going to say.

"You're wrong, Johnny," he said.

"What?"

"I said, you're wrong. Cicely and I were bound to come to the end of our tether sometime."

"You don't mean—things like this have happened before!"

"Well, not quite like this, of course. And not quite happened."

"Then you think it—won't blow over?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I—I don't quite—" Again Johnny made that pitiful gesture across his eyes. "I thought——"

"I know. It was a sort of game we played, Johnny. But there's never been much in it—for either of us. It—never meant what it seemed to."

"Never?"

"Never. So you see this had to come, sooner or later. It's a wonder she stuck it as long as she did. She must have been—rather bored, I should think."

"I—it's a queer thing to know about one's sister."

"I'm sorry, Johnny."

"Oh, that's all right, I—I'm on your side." He turned away from them, blinking.

"Still?"

"Of course," gruffly.

"I don't suppose it was anybody's fault, really—we just never seemed to click."

"I still think she's got no right to let you down now."

"She's got a right to be happy if she can, hasn't she?"

"Oh, I suppose so. All the same—it's a rotten thing to do."

Charles glanced at Nancy then, and she shook her head slightly. He understood. They were to do the tactful thing, the somehow harder thing, and keep still. Johnny, who counted on them both, need not know quite everything quite yet. It was hard on Cicely—and at the same time it spared her pride. But one could not feel quite comfortable, being championed and looked up to, when only half the blame was Cicely's.

"It occurs to me," said Charles then, producing the surest comfort he knew, "that Mortimer is going to be pretty much cut up about

this. A good many years ago he brought me up in the way I should go. He may be looking round for something new to work on soon. If you still want the job—it might be a bit of luck for you. I'll speak to him if you like."

"Thanks very much."

"You've got twenty very amusing years ahead of you—if you follow in my illustrious footsteps! I've had a good time——"

"Oh, stop it, Charles, you're talking as though you were dead!"

"Far from it. I'm turning a corner, that's all, and I've just realized what a long lane it was. By the way, Johnny, I've opened the flat, you know, and Higgins is there to look after me. Your room will be ready, of course —in case you care to pig it with me from now on."

"Thanks—I will."

"I've got a new job, you know—five pounds a week, and I can pick the car."

That brought Johnny round.

"Charles, you can't possibly go on with this!"

"He's right, Charles," said Nancy firmly. "What on earth did you do with the car we hired?"

"Paid him, and a bit more, to go and lose

himself for three weeks. I said it was a bet."

"Well, now you can go and find him," she said, hardening her heart.

"He's lost," grinned Charles, and Johnny bore down on him.

"Charles, you lunatic, get Nancy out of this disreputable hole and come back to Town as fast as ever you can!"

"It is a hole." Charles looked appreciatively round the room again. "I never meant this part of it to happen."

"But you might have known something would happen!" cried Johnny, thoroughly exasperated.

"I suppose it was a crazy idea—but I was fed to the teeth. Anyway, the car will be ready now—that fellow knew what to do, and will have her put back together in five minutes more. We can get on to Canterbury at once—too late for anything but a cold dinner, perhaps. Mrs. Martin won't like that! Hullo, here's tea."

He stood aside for small Bessie with a big tray.

"You'd better have some before you go, Johnny." Nancy got up to pour it.

"No, thanks—I'll have a spot of Scotch in the bar and get back to Town—you'll find

me mewing on the doorstep, Charles, when you arrive. Good-night, Nancy. Cheerio, Charles!"

He left them, a little less wretched, take it all in all, than when he came. He would get his chance with Mortimer, and there was still his room in Charles' flat. Sisters were at a discount.

He went down to the reeking bar, and debated over a whiskey and soda whether to ring boldly for the maid and ask what her extraordinary behavior meant—or try a bit of surreptitious snooping in the hope of coming upon her in the rear regions of the inn—or just to bung off to Town sensibly and trust Charles to take care of himself.

## V

BESSIE put down the tea tray and set out the cups, trying not to make a clatter in the silence these two would not break.

*Cheerio, Charles.* Then the new young gentleman was in the game, whatever it was. And he was on Charles' side, just as she had hoped. This was comforting. If only he wouldn't go until they had finished tea up there, and were ready to go too—if only he would wait and be there to back Charles up, if . . .

But it must be all right, or he would never be going away like that, so casually.

She left the room reluctantly, with the silence still unbroken. It was not an embarrassed silence, nor an uncomfortable one. They were simply waiting, rather absent-mindedly, for her to go.

Her untidy shoes scuffed thoughtfully down the stairs.

Should she try to find the young gentleman

in the bar and—well, if she did find him there, what could she say? She had warned him once, insanely. Apparently he thought nothing of that. Doubtless he knew well enough what he was about. No friend of Charles would leave him if he was not perfectly safe.

Generations of inarticulateness sent her drearily back to the scullery, where she hung about in fidgety idleness with a glance now at the door to the bar, where the young gentleman sat with his solitary whiskey and soda, and Mr. Jepson rioted soberly with a friend over fat, frothy mugs of beer—a glance now out of the window at the sodden courtyard where the three cars waited, the red Daimler nearest the house, headed out, in readiness for Mrs. Martin's departure—and now a glance at the foot of the stairs in the back passage, up which Charles had passed a short time ago on his way to the writing-room. He would come down the front way, with the ladies and the luggage. After that, she would never see him again.

And yet she was impatient for him to go.

Her eyes wavered round the three-pointed compass again. If she finished scrubbing the office floor now she would be there on her knees at the foot of the stairs when he came down.

She returned slowly to the deserted pail, and thumped down beside it patiently; groped in its tepid depths for the cloth; slopped a new puddle on to the damp floor. Waiting. Listening. Watching. For what?

In the writing-room, Charles stood again with his back against a door, looking at Nancy. Again she waited, watching him.

*That was bound to happen,* he had said before, when he kissed her. Unconsciously she was waiting to hear it now, for this too seemed to her inevitable. She belonged to Charles—so patiently, so hopelessly, she had been his that there had been no other way for it to end. Startling, she found, to have it come so soon. But to her singleminded viewpoint inevitable, now that it had happened.

Still he did not speak—only looked at her through the growing twilight of the room, bareheaded, cap in hand, his slenderness seen to advantage in the dark livery. He had never looked to her so Charlesish as in this silly masquerade, and to her girl's eyes the shabby room only set him off the better, in the silver-buttoned opulence of his own servant's livery.

And Charles, so accustomed to seeing this uncritical idolatry in the gaze of people on whom his own friendly attention rested that it

had never occurred to him to give it a name, so thoroughly spoilt as to be unspoilable, was thinking how sweet she was in all this squalor, and how unconscious of it. His maturity did not flinch from the innuendoes of the place with Johnny's sick abhorrence. He merely regretted in a parenthetical sort of way that their first mutual moments of what would eventually become freedom should have found them in surroundings so bare of beauty.

So he stood against the door, able to savor the situation for what it held of humor and promise, able to wait, unwilling to snatch at what their next kiss would release.

"Funny, isn't it," he said, not smiling.

She gave a happy little laugh.

"The Lord will provide!" cried Nancy, rejoicing recklessly in her young confidence in the ultimate indulgence of Providence.

Their eyes held. Hers were wide with the stupendous adventure he embodied, and a puzzlement that he still made no move when she could be taken in three strides. His gaze was long with the sober knowledge that next time, when it came, there need be no open door behind, and no one popping in.

His voice went low before the flare of expectancy in her eyes.

"God in heaven, am I ever to see you alone!" he cried beneath his breath.

"It begins to look as though you might." She caught her own hands, one to the other, with a gesture inexpressibly young, as though she caught at life itself to steady them, thus regaining her emotional balance and adjusting herself to his immobility. She could wait too. "In the meantime, I've got to send you away —tomorrow morning. You're going to be fired, my good man!"

But he was not prepared for that.

"Nancy, I can't go away—I daren't let you out of my sight now that this has happened, I—" He broke off with a gesture of inadequacy. "What are words! Darling, we've no choice left to make, do you see? You haven't got to worry about my giving up politics, I'm chucked out! You haven't got an altruistic leg to stand on!"

"Shall you mind—being chucked out?"

"What do you think?" he smiled, holding it a question unutterably foolish.

"You're bound to miss your job," she worried.

"You forget I've just had another offer."

She stood looking at him from across the room, mirroring his own motionlessness, her

face in shadow. That gay, inconsequent mind of his, with its incurably frivolous moments when one least expected them! Impossible to be dull, or sad, or even serious with him for long. And there had been little enough to laugh at, ever. . . .

"Oh, Charles, I do love you so!"

It reached him faintly through the dusk. He started toward her then, glanced with a helpless distaste round the stale room, and threw out his hands.

"Not here!" he objected whimsically.

"I'd better go and tell Mrs. Martin tea has come," she sighed, fumbling hastily for the commonplace. "She must be sleeping like the Seven!"

"We've let it get cold." He glanced at the table, conscience smitten.

"You've made a frightful hit, Charles! She'll be sorry to lose you!"

"Well, look here, why can't I go on with it, after all? It would be perfectly safe, nobody looks at a chauffeur!"

"Everyone looks at this one, with an acquisitive eye! You've overdone it, Charles. You're the good God's answer to every parlormaid's prayer! Is that Rogers' uniform?"

"Yes, I borrowed his new one. I told him

it was a bet." He looked down at himself approvingly. "Not bad, is it!" he grinned.

"Not bad!" she agreed, laughing.

"Nancy, either let me go on with it, or else chuck it yourself! Think of the time it wastes if I have to kick my heels in Town for three weeks without you!"

She shook her head.

"But you're not going to need Mrs. Martin's money now," he pointed out with some diffidence. "You can see that—can't you."

"I couldn't disappoint her now," she insisted obstinately. "But there's too much risk for you. Here we are, on the very first day, stuck with a breakdown only a few miles from the Grange. You might have been caught out any minute."

"But I haven't been, and it's over now. I hope you're not letting Johnny's gloomy Cassandra mutterings scare you. These things happen only once. I'll be safe enough once we start West. Nobody knows me at Winchester."

"No, Charles, don't coax." She spoke firmly because she felt herself slipping. "It's much too nervous work—for me, anyway."

"But I shan't see you for three weeks!"

"I'm afraid not."

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Worse than that."

"Well, then—" he was beginning, in that ultra-reasonable, wooing tone he reserved for perorations, but she threw out a hand as though the words had been a movement bringing him nearer.

"Charles, I—I've got to ask you something."

"Something serious, like that?"

"Very serious."

He waited.

"Well?" he encouraged.

"Well, I've been thinking—those three weeks will give us time to be sure you don't feel differently about it—now."

He thought that over. And it seemed to his simple soul, so devoid of the affectation of modesty, yet so innocent of an inferiority complex, that she surely could not mean what it seemed as though she meant. His faith in his own ability to comprehend her was pitiably small.

"Are you being silly?" he asked incredulously.

"I don't think so."

He perceived that she was.

"I'm doing you the honor to think that you

don't mean what I think you mean. So make yourself clear at once."

"Well, it's only—sometimes when a thing seems quite hopeless it looks much more alluring than after it's come within reach."

"That's a charming piece of abstract philosophy," he remarked. "But——"

"Well—after all, I'm just the little girl you hardly looked at when you came to see Mummy a few years ago—and you're the great Charles Gordon——"

"Oh, rot—!" The great Charles Gordon reached her in three strides.

"I'm so used to your being the nearest fixed star," she went on with difficulty, muffled against his coat, "it's rather—much, to find you in my hand—like this——"

"You *are* an ass, Nancy—don't ever change, will you!"

Just as he kissed her, forgetful now of that ugly room with its sinister shadows, a man's voice rose excitedly in the next room beyond the locked door.

"I didn't! *I didn't!* You've no right to say that!" Somebody was rattling the knob of the connecting door and fumbling with a key in the lock. "Let me out of here! For God's

sake somebody let me out of here! Don't do that—don't—*I swear I didn't tell, I*——"

The words climbed to a hoarse scream, which shattered sharply into silence as a single shot was fired in the next room.

## VI

IT was May in England, on a well-paved road between two cathedral towns. The room might be strange and dark and ugly, but a fire burned in it, and tea was cooling on the table.

Yet a shot had been fired beyond that locked door.

She was still in his arms, where a moment ago she had felt happier, safer, more confident of life than ever before. They stood so, hearing the beat of rain in gusts against the window pane and the sigh of a dying coal in the grate, while the knob turned and that door opened slowly toward them under some unseen pressure. There was an incredible choking sound with a rattle in it—and then the thud of a body on the floor. A man's outflung hand groped at the carpet beyond the edge of the door, went rigid, and was still.

Nancy, white-lipped and shaking, made no sound. Charles, after that first paralyzed mo-

ment when his sanity rejected the whole business, went swiftly to look into the other room. It was empty.

On his way to the door leading out of it into the corridor, he noticed that the window was raised an inch or two from the sill—scarcely enough for the driving rain to wet the woodwork—and remembered that it was a second floor room with a paved courtyard below.

*"Charles, come here!"*

It jerked him back to the writing-room door, where Nancy stood above the body which lay stretched across the threshold. She pointed to the bloodstain already widening on the threadbare carpet, horridly visible in the fading daylight from the window. He dropped to one knee beside the body, hardly aware as he did so that Nancy slipped past him fearlessly into the bedroom.

A glance was enough.

"I'm afraid he's dead," said Charles, beyond surprise.

Her voice came back sharply from the next room.

"Look! I've found something!"

"Nancy, come out of there—what are you doing?——"

He pulled her hastily back into the writing-

room, past the body on the floor, and she showed him a small blunt revolver.

"It was lying under the window."

"Drop it!" He seized her wrist and jerked the gun away, into his handkerchief. "You're putting fingerprints on it, idiot!"

"But we——"

"Go straight to Johnny in the bar—act as though you belong with him—only the maid saw us come in together—I'll manage that——"

"But I won't leave——"

"Look out, some one coming—go through that room—dark passage—back stairs to bar on the left—shut the door behind you——"

His ruthless hand sent her reeling into the bedroom as the door into the passage was thrust open. Bessie stood there, panting from a run up the stairs, one knobbly hand clutching at the smothering pulse in her thin throat.

"Don't talk—I've got her away," he greeted her briefly.

"Oh, Lor', oh, Lor'—!" moaned Bessie, and staggered back against the door at a shove from behind, as Mr. Jepson arrived hysterically from the bar, by way of the office and the front stairs.

Charles stood silhouetted against the dim-

ming window, the gun embedded in his handkerchief. The firelight, flaring up in a new draught, wavered eerily across that rigid hand on the carpet, with its inch of white cuff showing like a bandage, and glinted on the dull metal of the gun-barrel.

" 'Ere they are!" babbled Jepson excitedly, gesticulating behind him into the passage, which was quite black now. "They're in the writing-room—I've got 'em—'ere in the writing-room like I said—I *said* it came from 'ere—mind that other door, 'Enry—I've got 'em, I 'ave—'e's quiet enough now, come along——"

The Boots pushed past him reluctantly toward the passage door of the bedroom beyond, with a scared glance in at the fire-lit writing-room and the dark figure standing so still in the middle of it. But Nancy, fleeing by blind instinct through the unfamiliar blackness of the passage, had already reached the back stairs on her way to Johnny.

"It's murder!" screamed Jepson, as his rather beery friend joined him, gaping, at the door. "I knew I 'eard a shot! Try to tell me I don't know a shot when I 'ear one! *Murder,* by the Lord! In my 'ouse, too! That's 'im, all right, there with the gun! 'Enry! Run

fetch the constable out on the 'Igh Street! Sharp, now! No peepin' and gossipin' on the way! *'Ere,* down the front stairs, boy, and through the bar, it's shortest! Tell 'im it's murder, do you 'ear?"

Henry crowded past the two at the door again, and was heard thumping down the front stairs.

"What on earth has happened?"

This was Mrs. Martin's voice, clearing a way through beeriness like a scythe so that she stood unimpeded, with Jepson, on the threshold of the writing-room.

"Now, ma'am, I'd keep out of this if I was you." Jepson was surpassing himself as landlord of the inn. "You, now, with that gun!" he addressed himself truculently to the motionless Charles. "You stand right where you are, and don't you move! Put that gun *down,* I say!"

"Gerrard, what does this mean?"

"It means murder, that's what it means, ma'am!" Jepson continued, almost without a pause for breath. "And I'd 'ave you know, ma'am——"

"Oh, don't be absurd!" she bade him sharply. "This man is my chauffeur!"

"Then you'll 'ave to step inside, ma'am, and

wait till the constable comes," announced Jepson with satisfaction.

"But I don't understand—" She stepped over the threshold close to Bessie, who shrank back against the door behind her. "Oh, my God, what's that?" She pointed at the dead hand on the carpet, practically at Charles' feet.

"That's the corpse, ma'am," replied Jepson with still greater satisfaction. *"'E* shot 'im! Plain as the nose on your face! Pretty sort of chauffeur if you ask me, ma'am!"

"Gerrard, you didn't! How did this happen?"

As she spoke, Mrs. Martin became conscious of a small imperative pressure on her arm and a whisper——

*" 'E got 'er away—don't talk!"* Bessie!

"Where's that constable?" Jepson was demanding fussily, prancing in the doorway. "Where's 'Enry? Keep quiet, you!" fiercely, to Charles. "Just you try and use that gun again! In my 'ouse, too! *'Enry!* This will ruin me, it will—I've never 'ad to 'ave the police in before. *'Enry!* Just you wait 'ere, ma'am—and no tricks, mind!"

He bustled away, shouting for Henry and the constable. His beery friend groped along

the dark passage behind him, muddled but helpful.

" 'Ere—where you orf to?—'ere, Ambrose, 'arf a mo—lemme—'ere, I say, *I'll* go—arf a mo——"

"How did It get in here?" demanded Mrs. Martin. "I thought that door was locked. Where's—Gerrard, do say something, for heaven's sake!"

"He was trying to save himself," said Charles literally, and nothing more.

Things had taken a turn which it was still impossible for him to credit. Charles Gordon, M.P., trapped in a second floor room in a doubtful roadside pub, with a corpse unaccounted for at his feet—and yet not Charles Gordon, but a chauffeur named Gerrard, whose driving license, were he asked for it, would tell a damning tale. A nameless man in a smart uniform, whose photographs must eventually be recognized as the likenesses of a dependable statesman of the Empire (disappeared)—a nameless man whose incognito was precarious, accused of murder on a public highway. How long would it go on? His watch, his wallet, his cuff-links, his tailor—any one of them would do Charles Gordon in. . . .

Bessie had edged toward him, where he

stood so quietly with the gun still in his handkerchief.

"I know 'ow you can get away," said Bessie, very low.

"Get away?"

His head jerked toward her alertly. She saw that his eyes were clear and sane. Keeping his head. No sign of fear or guilt or bluster. Right as rain.

"That window in there—" She pointed through the open bedroom door behind him. "*'E* went that way, I'd swear to it."

"Did you see him?"

"No. But 'e must 'ave known the garage roof comes out below—it ain't a bad drop, I'd try for it myself if I was you—" Her hands were twisting nervously in her apron. "Quick, though, if you're goin'! The constable'll be 'ere in a minute!"

He glanced over his shoulder into the bedroom, where the window showed faintly in the dusk.

The fellow must have hung there by one hand long enough to work the window down again, well below the width of a man's body—that wanted a bit of pluck. When it stuck an inch or two above the sill, or perhaps when Charles first reached the door, he had dropped

to the little roof below, and then to the courtyard.

Charles was thinking fast and clearly now.

His own chance with the window would be a slim one, with the constable on his way in. It was a forlorn hope, but he might still try it later, if he got a chance—if need be—for the Daimler stood just below, headed outward in readiness for Mrs. Martin's departure. He had left the mechanic making the final adjustments of her bonnet.

To run for it now and meet the constable as a fugitive—to leave it till the constable and possibly an Inspector were in the room—neither one looked much good. But the window might still be a handy thing to know about.

"Don't mention the roof," he cautioned, and the two women nodded, watching him intently. "Insist that he had to go by the door."

His greatest danger, so far, was simply recognition in those clothes. The graver aspects of his situation were still too tremendous to be seen really in focus. He must go on being Gerrard as long as he could. It was doubtless beyond the imagination of a country constable to at once demand the driving license, which lived in a pocket of the Daimler

which stood below—his own license, with the number of the car. He wondered why he had brought it. But if this thing did not solve itself soon, if Scotland Yard should be called in, he was done.

"I had nothing to do with this," he reassured the two silent women, briefly.

"I know you didn't," said Bessie, with a passing wonder at that upstanding girl's desertion. Bessie would not have bolted like that.

He looked across her at Mrs. Martin.

"Nancy's safe by now," he said. "I couldn't have her mixed up in this. She went down the back way."

"She should have stayed," said Mrs. Martin with a strange implacability which drew Bessie's grateful eyes. Then it occurred to Mrs. Martin suddenly that he had said "Nancy" as though he was accustomed to it. As though he was not a chauffeur.

"Lucky she didn't, I think. We can keep her out of it entirely if we're careful—look out, they're coming—keep still—give me time——"

"You've lost your chance—" Bessie's voice faded away sadly into the shadows by the door, as the Law arrived, puffing, with Jepson

at its heels and his beery shadow close behind.

"Now, then—what's all this?" The inevitable formula, from Poplar to Shepherd's Bush, from the Lizard to John o' Groat's.

" 'E shot 'im," said Jepson simply.

"Let's have a light 'ere," said the constable, whose aspirates were variable.

"Right you are, constable—I've only just 'ad the electric light put in——"

Jepson pressed the switch by the door with the pride of a stage manager, and the bare bulb which hung in the middle of the room snapped to sickly life. It blotted out the fire, the room's sole remaining claim to sanity, and struck sharply on the dead hand at the edge of the open door, with its margin of white cuff which bracketed it horridly with the white of Charles' handkerchief enfolding the gun.

"Hel-lo!" said the constable. "This is bad."

"That's the fellow, constable—that chauffeur, there—wipin' at the gun with 'is 'andkerchief, 'e was," accused Jepson with zest. "Fingerprints—I read in a book—very cool, I must say—never even tried to escape—not that 'e's 'ad much of a chance, as you might say," he added hastily, with an afterthought that somebody should have been told off to

keep an eye on Charles while the constable was being fetched.

The constable had crossed the room with the measured tread of the Force, his shining water-proof dripping at every step, and he bent over the body knowingly—the open door partly screened his investigation from those clustered near the passage door. They waited tensely, but not for long.

"This man's dead as mutton." He straightened. "Shot in the throat at close range—must have been just coming through the door when he was dropped. Let's 'ave the gun, governor." He took it from Charles, still in the handkerchief, and laid it on the floor beside the dead man. "Wipin' off fingerprints, were you? That's bad."

"The man was dead before I ever saw him." Charles spoke in his own defence for the first time, and a little stir ran through his hearers.

"What's that?" The constable eyed him sharply, for the words had an unmistakable ring of truth.

"Found 'is tongue," commented Jepson.

Charles recognized that there were grounds for the constable's diagnosis—the body lay crumpled face down, as though the man had entered the room and fallen forward as he

came. Whereas, he must have received the bullet with his back to the door, and his own weight, supported on the hand which at that moment turned the knob, had swung him round as the door gave way behind him. The hand farthest from the door was flung out in an arc seeking instinctively to break his fall. The right hand, which had clung to the knob for an appreciable moment, lay at his side, the elbow a little bent.

For the first time, in a flash of sheer horror, Charles reconstructed the scene on the other side of that door—the poor devil facing his murderer at the end, warding off with a futile outflung hand the bullet which had been so mercifully sure—the spasmodic twist of the knob and the headlong lurch—too late.

For the first time, a shudder ran along his spine.

Out came the notebook of the Law and the stub of pencil.

"I'll have to know exactly what happened 'ere. Though I warn you," he proceeded according to the formula, "that anything you say may be taken down as evidence against you."

"There was some sort of quarrel in there," Charles stated calmly. "The man was trying

to get out of that room through this one when he was killed."

"That's a lie!" shrilled Jepson, fevered with the unaccountable lust of the man-hunt, which demands a victim and clamors for reprisal. "What about the gun in your 'and?"

"I found the gun on the floor in the next room." Charles was looking steadily at the constable, who seemed impressed. "By the time I got there the other man had vanished—and I was fool enough to pick the thing up."

"And where were *you* when that shot was fired?" asked the constable.

"In this room."

"What were you doing here?"

"I had come up to report that the car was ready."

"You say you 'eard a quarrel in that room?"

"I heard this man's voice, begging for mercy and shouting that he hadn't done something he was accused of."

"Did you 'ear another voice talking to him?"

"No."

"But you say he was killed trying to get out of that room into this one."

"Yes."

"Any witnesses to that?"

"No," said Charles without blinking.

Bessie's knobbly fingers crept up to her mouth. Her eyes met Mrs. Martin's, and they both looked away.

"Had you ever seen deceased before?" the constable went on.

"No."

"You say you went into that room and picked the gun up off the floor."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"But you saw nobody in that room then."

"No."

"How long between the time the shot was fired and the time you went into that room?"

"Not much more than a minute."

"What happened in the meantime?"

"I stood like a post, I think, and watched the man die. It was all so quick—he was dead within thirty seconds—dead before I could pull myself together enough to cross the room to him."

The constable stepped past the body and entered the bedroom, returning almost at once.

"No luggage?" he inquired of Jepson.

"Ain't there?" said Jepson ineffectually.

The constable looked at Charles.

"Is the door from that room into the passage open or shut?"

"Shut," said Charles confidently.

It was the right answer. The constable turned to Jepson.

"Could anyone have got away through that door between the time the shot was fired and the time you reached the upper passage?"

"Of course not!" Jepson scorned any such idea on principle. "Not even if 'e knew the 'ouse, 'e couldn't. 'E'd 'ave 'ad to go down the back stairs and through the bar or else run bang into us comin' up the front stairs."

"Is the only exit through the bar?"

"Or past the office and the scullery. Bessie was there. Wasn't you, Bessie."

"Yes, sir."

"You didn't see anyone leave the inn?" The constable's eyes were upon her.

"No, sir."

"He couldn't have got away through the bar without being seen?" He turned again to Jepson.

"We was sittin' in the bar—me and Tompkins, 'ere, 'aving a glass of beer."

"That's right," said Tompkins.

"But after the shot was fired you left the bar and came up 'ere," the constable reminded him patiently. "Was anyone else in the bar at the time?"

" 'Tisn't what you'd call a busy day. There

was only a young gentleman said 'e was drivin' up to Town and stepped off for a drop of Scotch. *'E's* all right, though—'e was sittin' there in the bar in plain sight of both of us when the shot was fired up 'ere."

"That's right," said Tompkins.

"Where is the young gentleman now?"

" 'Enry! Run down to the bar and fetch the young gentleman as was 'aving a drop of Scotch. Sharp, now!"

Henry vanished, clumpingly.

"But you can't come at nothing that way, constable," Jepson assured him. "The chauffeur's your man, and no mistake."

"That's right," said Tompkins, and they both glared balefully at Charles, who had done nothing to incur their ill will except ignore them.

"One minute now." The Law does not jump to conclusions. "Are you sure there's no other exit from that room besides the door into the passage and the one into this room?"

"There's the window!" jeered Jepson, who longed to see Charles in handcuffs without delay. "It's a bit 'igh for jumping—it's alongside those—'ave a look yourself!" And he gestured toward the windows of the writing-room, which were far enough along the same

wall to be clear of the garage roof, and presented a sheer drop to the paved yard.

The constable stepped to one of them, looked down into the wet dusk, and made a note in his book.

"Nobody in the bar now, sir." Henry had returned, breathless.

" 'Opped it," said Jepson philosophically. "No loss. *'E* wasn't the sort to go shovin' his nose in."

"That's right," said Tompkins.

The constable made a note, and Charles drew an easier breath. Nancy was safe away.

At the first mention of the window Mrs. Martin had stirred uneasily and felt Bessie's quick fingers on her arm. Charles wanted that window up his sleeve still. Neither of them understood what possible use he could make of it now, and only Bessie was content to leave it at that.

Ignorant of the imperative matter of his hidden identity, Mrs. Martin would have thrown everything into the scales of justice at once, to lighten suspicion as far as possible. Bessie, equally ignorant, perceived fatalistically that he was fairly in for it anyhow, no matter what was said now. But he was not

in gaol yet, and until he was, let the window go.

It was like that girl, thought Bessie, unjustly, to escape with her young man and leave Charles to get out of this the best he could. She knew he would try to shield her, of course. Women like that were always shielded. Even the young gentleman had basely deserted his own kind in order to do it. Bessie set her bony young jaw. She was disappointed in Johnny. And she had meant, at worst, to throw him to the lions in place of Charles.

Accustomed to the ways of the inn, she was able to assume that all four of these people—the old lady, the blue-eyed young gentleman, the mysterious Charles, and the girl—might be entirely guiltless of any connection with the crime. They were innocent bystanders only, caught in the backwash of the inn's malignant destiny.

But the girl had been here in the room when the victim died, she knew exactly what happened, where Charles had stood, how the door had been opened. He said he had no witnesses—but if it came to that, Bessie could give him the lie direct and bring the girl to book.

*Back stairs to bar on the left*—she had heard it as she opened the door. The girl must have had the luck to reach the bar at the same moment that Mr. Jepson and Tompkins were groping their way up the front stairs in Bessie's breakneck wake, the excited Henry clattering at their heels. She had found the young gentleman alone there. Had he known she would come and waited for her? How could he have known? No, that was all just a bit of her luck, his being there. She might be half way to Rochester now, with him, but sooner or later she could be made to tell what she knew. There was somebody to see to that.

Bessie took no time now to wonder at the impressive verification of her forebodings about Charles. Life at the inn made one a fatalist. She had known, somehow, that trouble was waiting for him here and it had got him. One could only keep a watchful eye on him now, and do what one could when the time came. And the old lady would back one up. She liked Charles too.

Mrs. Martin was not by nature a silent woman, but she held her tongue now, under Bessie's warning pressure. Evidently the queer little creature meant to stand by him too. Mrs. Martin was busy wishing to God

she had gone to the bottom of things with Nancy at once instead of taking that nap. If only she had not meant to be so clever and find things out for herself, she might at least have known whatever Nancy knew.

Nancy must have been here with Gerrard when the man was killed. And rather than testify in Gerrard's defence, rather than stand up and tell what she knew, what she must have seen and heard, alone here with Gerrard when the man died, Nancy had disappeared. That looked bad. Besides, it wasn't like her. And if she had simply lost her head and bolted, that wasn't like her either.

What on earth had become of Nancy? It was only by the grace of God that her flight had not drawn instant suspicion upon her—and she might not have got clean away. Could she still be found and dragged to the inquest, or trial, or whatever it was? An awful business, for a young girl. And yet no one but Nancy knew exactly where Gerrard stood.

Suppose he was actually tried for murder. Nancy would have to speak then, if she had a spark of human decency. It would kill her mother. Perhaps that was why she had run away. But even that was not like Nancy. And where could she have got to? The young

gentleman in the bar parlor? Where did he come in? Mrs. Martin had not seen him, and now he had vanished too. He and Nancy—together? If she had been quick she might have found out from Gerrard in those few moments before the policeman came. But one was stunned—speechless—paralyzed.

The window, then. Was he going to try for it, under the policeman's very nose? The car was below. Perhaps Nancy would be in it, waiting. That was it, of course. Mrs. Martin felt momentarily relieved. But the agency could trace the car. There could be no escape that way for Gerrard.

*Who was Gerrard?*

## VII

NANCY, pelting down the back stairs and along a noisome passage to the bar, had found Johnny peering out the window into the soggy road. The bar was at the front of the house and had no windows on the courtyard.

She could hear Jepson and Tompkins somewhere in the direction of the front stairs, shouting for Henry, without whom they were apparently unwilling to proceed about their investigations.

"What's happened?" cried Johnny at sight of her, and simultaneously——

"Did you see him?" she panted, bringing up against his shoulder. "The man who got away—*did you see him?*"

"No—what man?—what *was* that?—it sounded like a shot!"

"It was a shot! There's a man been murdered in the next room——"

"*Murdered!* Where's Charles?"

"Up there—with the gun! The man got away—did you see anyone escaping down the road?"

"I haven't seen a soul—I thought it was something outside—good Lord, I thought those two old birds were crazy when they began bleating about guns—*where's Charles?*"

"Up there, I tell you—in the writing-room! He wanted me to get away with you, but we can't leave him—*listen!*"

It was Henry, catapulting down the front stairs for the constable. He saw them at the window, and shouted his news as he passed.

"It's murder!" he shouted at them, big with his own importance. "We've got 'im too—that chauffeur did it—standin' there with the gun still in 'is 'and, 'e was—'e'll 'ang for this, right enough! I'm going to fetch the constable——"

He wrenched open the door and sped out, bareheaded, into the rain.

"Charles!" they whispered on the same breath, staring whitely into one another's eyes.

"They think he did it!" sobbed Nancy. "I gave him the gun—Johnny, they'll arrest him—what can we *do*——?"

Johnny was trying to take it in. Murder—at an inn like this one—the slayer escaped—

Charles caught with the gun in his hand, and wearing a chauffeur's kit—Charles, dressed in his own chauffeur's livery, arrested for murder—*'e'll 'ang for this*——

Nancy was sobbing there beside him. She shouldn't be seen here—Charles had meant her to get away—but they could never leave Charles now—unless——

He caught her arm.

"Come along," he said. "I've got it!"

"We can't leave Charles!" she protested.

"We've got to leave him! We're going up to Town as fast as ever we can! Come along——"

She jerked away from him angrily.

"Are you going to let them arrest Charles without lifting a finger?"

"We can't stop them if we stay here. Don't funk, Nancy—Mortimer's the man for this job." He jerked her toward the passage which led to the courtyard. "We can get out this way. Hurry up!"

"What can Mortimer do?" gulped Nancy as she was being more or less thrown into the two-seater.

"That's up to him!" said Johnny, without humor, and the little car slipped away into the

dusk. "He'll never let Charles be done in by a thing like this!"

Nancy sat quiescent, hypnotized, for a few minutes, then galvanized into panic.

"Johnny, I can't just vanish like this—whatever will he think of me!"

"He'll think you did as he meant you to."

"But——"

"He wanted you to get away with me, didn't he?"

"He didn't know then—I didn't realize—Johnny, I must get out and run back while you——"

"Sit still," snapped Johnny, skidding into the main road below the bridge. "He doesn't want you mixed up in it—less now than ever."

"I don't care, I don't care, if Charles is in this thing *I'm* in it! If Charles has got to go to gaol, *I'll* go to gaol! We were together in that room when it happened, and I ran in and picked up the gun first—it's my fault they saw it in his hand like that, and I'll never forgive myself! Oh, what if they do think things about me, I'm not ashamed of Charles, no matter what he's wearing! And I'm not going to hide behind him, I tell you, I'll take my share of anything that comes to him——"

"Nancy, for God's sake—" cried Johnny,

appalled at this reckless sweeping away of reticence and self-control.

"But I was there, Johnny, can't you understand—I heard what he heard and saw what he did, and if they dare to accuse him of this filthy murder I'll go back there and fight, fight, *fight*——"

"Nancy, pull yourself together!" he commanded sharply in youthful horror of a woman's hysteria, and with some effect at last. There was tense silence in the little car. (Would she have cared as much as this if it had been himself, whispered an insidious doubt in Johnny's brain—of course not—it was Charles—but even for Charles—?) "What time is it?" he asked rationally, after a minute.

"I haven't got a watch."

"I can't see mine." Both his hands were busy with the straining wheel. "It must be after eight, I should think."

"How long will it take us to get to Downing Street?"

"About three hours at this rate—I daren't take it too fast on these roads, and I haven't enough petrol for the run—we'll have to stop and fill up somewhere along the way."

The two-seater tore on recklessly into the slow English dark. In clear weather there

would have been still a glow in the west at nine o'clock, but tonight the car's lights were lost at once in an engulfing blackness.

Nancy sat quiet again, apathetic with the necessity for inaction, her mind a fiery pinwheel of horrors. To have everything snatched away like this, just as life was getting too good to be true—something like this was bound to happen, she reminded herself bitterly, or life would have become too easy. But they had deserved to be happy, they had been trying to play fair—it wasn't as if they hadn't been willing to play fair——

*It's murder—'e'll 'ang for this.* Charles! She had left Charles behind, with a gun in his hand and a policeman on the way—they would find out who he was—in a chauffeur's kit!—they would arrest him, it would be in all the papers—they would try him for murder—Charles!—she knew very little about such things, but perhaps if the other man was never found——

Could Charles be hanged for the murder of a man he had never seen till after the man was dead? She had a child's instinctive terror of the mysteries of the Law, as embodied in wigs and gowns and courtrooms. Policemen were different. They existed to help you across the

street and to tell you anything you wanted to know. But even a policeman, once he takes out his note-book and stub of pencil, becomes awful. And if that other man could not be found——

She clenched her hands. Even now, she must not let Johnny know all that it meant to her to leave Charles like that. She must keep up her end. Charles would have a right to expect that of her. Now that this thing had happened to them, the less she appeared to figure in his life the better for him. And yet—why else was he there, in those clothes—why else had he touched the gun?

It was all her fault, it would all lead home to her, and they would say Charles had been making a fool of himself about a woman. Johnny would know, and it would break his heart. Cicely would know, and hate them both. England would know, and write him off the rolls.

Oh, but she had been mad to let him start at all! She should have given him away at once to Mrs. Martin, made a scene, if need be, in London that morning. Anything. It was all through her that Charles might hang——

A dry little sob tore through her.

"Steady," said Johnny, never taking his

eyes off the road, and they reached the first rain-blurred lights of Rochester.

Finally, in the long monotony of the dark drive Londonwards, she managed to give him some sort of coherent story of what had happened at the inn and how they had got there in the beginning. He listened without many questions, his mind running busily along beside her voice, like a dog with its nose to the trail.

It was an incredible thing, but it had happened, and to the two people he loved best in the world. Cicely had thrown her cap over the windmill. Now Charles, and even Nancy had got into a hopeless muddle. With luck, she might not be openly involved, for Charles would never tell. With luck, they could keep Nancy out of it. But life was not the same, could never be quite the same.

Keep the car on the road, and get to Mortimer. Mortimer would take charge. . . .

An endless nightmare of endless road, gleaming in the light of the little car's lamps. . . .

There was a small exclamation out of the murk beside him. He leaned toward her, watching the road.

"What is it?"

"My hand bag—I left it in the chair by the fire!"

## VIII

MEANWHILE, the constable proceeded along the usual lines.

"You say you found the gun on the floor in that room?"

"Yes. It belonged to the man who fired it and got away."

"But you never actually saw that man."

"No."

"You didn't even 'ear 'is voice?"

"No."

"And nobody saw him escape."

"I saw 'im come in." It was Bessie, unexpectedly. Unflinchingly, she faced the swift battery of eyes.

"*You* saw him come in?" said the constable, sharpening.

"Both of 'em."

"Both of 'em?" He waited, his pencil poised.

"*'Im.*" She jerked her head toward the dead man. "And the one with 'im."

"I never saw but one," said Jepson. "This

one 'ere. 'E ordered drinks for two. *I* say the chauffeur was the other one."

"You didn't see 'im because you was in the bar," said Bessie. "I brought the other one straight up 'ere——"

"You didn't ought to do that. I'm the landlord of this inn!"

Bessie held her ground.

"You was busy."

" 'Ow much did 'e give you, then?"

"Two shillin' piece," sullenly.

"'And it over." Jepson held out an uncompromising palm.

" 'Ere, now," remarked the constable gently.

"It's downstairs," said Bessie with a new defiance.

"You say you took another man upstairs?" pursued the constable, writing.

"Yes, sir. There was two of 'em in that room all along. I'll swear to that. I saw 'em both and I'd know 'em again. It was the other one asked for that room special, while this one was in the bar. I showed 'im the room across the passage first, but 'e would 'ave that one there. 'Twasn't ready, and I 'ad to change the bed— I 'ad a good look at 'im, I did, and I'd know 'im again, too."

"Why was he so set on that room?" queried the constable.

Her eyes slid away evasively.

"Dunno—it's the best room in the 'ouse—mebbe 'e'd been 'ere before."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"Don't think so. Not to notice."

"Did these two men arrive before or after the chauffeur?"

"Before. They'd been in there together 'arf an hour when 'e came. In there drinkin'."

"Could you describe the other man?"

"Short stout man, 'e was."

"Was he sober when 'e came?"

"I'd say 'e was, yes."

"Did you 'ear anything of a quarrel?"

"They was arguin', I thought, when they came in—but quiet enough about it, and that. 'Well, 'ave it your own way,' this one says to the stout one. '*I* don't know nothing about it,' 'e says. I didn't see 'em together again after that, but I passed this one coming up the stairs when I went down."

"What was the argument about?"

"I couldn't say, sir. That was all I 'eard."

"How was the other man dressed?"

"Some sort of dark cloth it was—and an old sort of mackintosh on top."

"Sure he wasn't wearing a kit like that under the mackintosh?" The constable indicated Charles.

"Not 'im. And 'e wasn't as 'igh as 'is shoulder, that one."

"I didn't see these two come neither," asserted Jepson aggrievedly. He bracketed Mrs. Martin and Charles with a gesture. "She says 'e's 'er chauffeur."

"That's right," said Tompkins, who was following everything with the keenest interest.

"When did you arrive at the inn, ma'am?" inquired the constable courteously, his pencil poised.

"Less than an hour ago. Well, perhaps—*quite* an hour ago. I've been asleep. Never thought it could be done on that bed. The maid brought us straight up here."

"She didn't ought to do that," complained Jepson.

"You were in the bar," Mrs. Martin reminded him crushingly. "I asked for a private sitting-room with a fire, while my car was being repaired. That room was already booked when we were shown this one, and that door was locked."

"Ah, that's a point," said the constable triumphantly. "I was comin' to that. If the

fellow wanted to get out of that room before he was murdered, what delayed him?"

"I told you. The door was locked. He must have had the key on that side."

"You're sure it was locked, ma'am?"

"I asked Gerrard to try it in order to be quite sure."

"Why did you do that, ma'am?"

"Anyone would want a door locked in this place! Especially after the maid said two gentlemen had booked that room for tonight."

"The chauffeur tried the door and said it was locked?"

"Yes."

"You didn't try it yourself?"

"No. I had no reason for doubting his word."

"Mmmmm," said the constable, and made a note.

"*I* didn't see 'em come in," maintained Jepson.

"I'm trying to get to Canterbury tonight, constable," explained Mrs. Martin. "I came in to rest while the car was being put right. It's the merest chance that I happened to stop here at all, or that Gerrard was in this room when the—murder was committed."

"May I have your name, please, ma'am?"

"Mrs. Fred Martin—widow."

"Thank you, ma'am. And where were you when the shot was fired?"

"Asleep in the room across the passage. I don't think I realized at first that it was a shot. Something woke me, and then I heard voices in the passage——"

"Whose voices would that be, ma'am?"

"This man, I think, was making most of the noise." Her glance at Jepson would have reduced most people to ashes.

"What was he saying?"

"He was shouting all the usual things about murder and police. I didn't believe a word of it, of course, till I got here."

"You didn't connect the disturbance with your chauffeur then?"

"Certainly not."

"You didn't even know that he had come upstairs?"

"No."

"How long has this man been in your employ, ma'am?"

"Not long," she admitted unwillingly. "But I've taken him on permanently. I'm sure you're on the wrong track, constable, if you think Gerrard had anything to do with the—murder."

"Why are you so firmly convinced of that, ma'am?"

"Well, I—I have every confidence in him."

"Did he bring references from former employers?"

"References?" The shock of the purely routine question left her stammering. One would never have thought of asking Gerrard for credentials. Besides, there was the agency —provided he had come from it at all. The whole mystery of him rose up against the idea of his being the usual chauffeur from the usual people whom she had always trusted. Everything pointed suddenly to the suspicion that Charles had been planted on her by someone else. She dared not mention the agency until she could make sure where he had come from. The agency might get him into trouble. More trouble, that is. "Why, no—you see—" she was beginning rather aimlessly.

"No references?" repeated the constable, surprised, and made a note of it. He was rather a young constable and very thorough. It was his first important case. "Who was your last employer?" he inquired of Charles.

Directly appealed to once more, Charles answered with quiet decision.

"I'd rather not say anything more until the Inspector comes."

"Inspector?" repeated the constable, taken aback.

"Yes, there will be an Inspector, won't there, when you have quite finished, and we shall have to go all over the same ground again."

"You'll get an Inspector fast enough, when I turn in my report," retorted the constable, nettled.

"I thought so," agreed Charles pleasantly. "Well, look here, until then can't we clear the room and build up the fire and be more comfortable?" And at a glance from him Bessie went to kneel on the hearth again, dealing efficiently with the fading coals. (Something up his sleeve, thought Bessie.)

"It's my business to 'ave things in order before the Inspector takes charge," asserted the constable, a bit pompously for one so young.

With the words, he bent forward suddenly and picked something out of the chair by the fire. It was a slim black antelope hand-bag with a silver letter C on it, Mrs. Martin's gift to Nancy in London a few days before. Beneath it lay a pair of little suede gloves.

"Were you alone in this room when the shot

was fired?" queried the constable, and for the first time since his entrance he regarded Charles with real suspicion.

"I was."

"Then the lady who owns these must have left this room previous to the murder."

"She must have done."

"No lady 'ere," put in Jepson helpfully. "No lady like *that* 'ere, unless she came with *them.*" And he looked accusingly at Mrs. Martin.

The room tightened perceptibly.

"Was there another lady travelling with you, ma'am?" inquired the constable, less gently.

"A young girl. My companion."

"Where is she now?"

"Why, I—don't know."

"Where did you see her last?"

"Here—in this room. Before I went to take a nap."

"You haven't seen her since the murder was committed?"

"No."

"Isn't that rather odd, ma'am?"

"I—hadn't thought about it."

"Are you making a deliberate effort to

shield this girl?" demanded the constable, feeling that now they were getting to it.

"No, I—she's only a child—I know her mother—I'm sure you're making a mistake if you think she——"

"Oh, you know her mother." He wrote in his little book, and she saw that she had blundered. "Then you will be able to 'elp us find her again in case she 'as disappeared."

"But you surely can't think she——"

"It's 'ard to know what to think, ma'am. A person who disappears from the scene of a crime draws suspicion upon theirself and no mistake. All I can say is, if she's gone she's chosen the best way to make us think about 'er." He turned again to Charles. "I suppose you realize that this is a very bad business. You'll 'ave to come along with me now."

"Gerrard!" gasped Mrs. Martin, and Bessie's cold hands shook at her firebuilding.

"Would you mind just asking the Inspector to come here at once?" requested Charles.

There was a perceptible pause. Those who had merely stared before now gaped. Mrs. Martin's distress was arrested by a new breathless attention. Bessie sat back on her heels, made idle by suspense, and the con-

stable—perhaps more than anyone else was the constable startled.

For with those words it was as though another person had entered the room, which had contained heretofore a middle-aged woman, a slavey, two local Kentishmen, a constable, and a chauffeur. Then, with the general effect of ventriloquism, an M.P. spoke; a University voice, with a House of Commons note in it, and the uncompromising inflections of one born to be obeyed.

"What's that?" said the constable at last, incredulous.

"Yes, you can't arrest me for this, you know. It's going much too far on the evidence you've got."

"Now, then, you'd better just come along with me," advised the constable with all possible tact, trying to think his ears deceived him.

"If I come with you now, I'm in this thing up to my neck, when as a matter of fact I'm merely a victim of coincidence, and have nothing whatever to do with it," said Charles, and the sudden, unconscious authority of his class lowered his quiet voice till Jepson leaned forward to hear. "Therefore I really must insist upon seeing the Inspector here on the scene of

the crime before making any defense whatever. Of course if he thinks the evidence is sufficient to arrest me, that settles it."

"Why, there's evidence to 'ang 'im!" cried Jepson with relish. After all the man was a chauffeur, wasn't he, and Jepson deeply resented his speaking as though he were not.

"Gerrard!" breathed Mrs. Martin again, and Bessie's hand went clutching at her thin throat.

His voice had given him away to Bessie now, unmistakably. He was no chauffeur, and she had the melancholy satisfaction of having known it all along. Evidence to hang him!

"It's not quite regular, sir," said the constable, impressed against his will, and desperately puzzled.

Charles sat down on the *sir,* and crossed his neat gaitered legs. He was gaining one thing. Time. So long as he kept himself out of handcuffs, out of gaol, and within reach of that window, for which he perceived a growing need, he had still a chance.

"Murder seldom is, is it?" he remarked pleasantly.

The constable, who had never handled a murder before, felt the force of this.

"If you would consider yourself *detained,* sir——"

"Quite," nodded Charles, as though from the front bench.

The constable turned to Jepson, and both of them were thoroughly bewildered at the unorthodox turn this situation had taken.

"Send somebody along for the Inspector," he commanded. "He'll be 'aving 'is dinner."

"Right you are, constable—the boy can go. 'Enry! Run fetch the Inspector from the police station—sharp, now——!"

Henry removed his eyes reluctantly from the toff in livery and obeyed.

"And you," said the constable to Jepson, "lock the door of that other room and fetch me the key."

"That's right," said Tompkins. "'Ere—Ambrose!—lemme—arf a mo——"

"You aren't going to lock us in with *that!*" objected Mrs. Martin, pointing at the corpse.

"I shan't be leavin' you alone with it, ma'am," the constable assured her gallantly.

# IX

BY allowing his voice to take charge of things, Charles had sacrificed half his incognito with that unmistakable note which can come into the quietest tone so that no matter how he may be dressed or what he may be accused of the world knows a man without argument for what he is and, right or wrong, pipes down. It would not take long after the Inspector's arrival for the chauffeur myth to dissolve entirely.

Charles had always a healthy innocence of apprehensions, but he was beginning to realize at last the preposterous gravity of his situation. He began to think seriously about the window. Jepson, satisfied in his single-track mind that the captive chauffeur was the murderer, had raised no hue and cry for a fugitive, and Johnny must have got Nancy well out of the neighborhood by now. Equally probable, in the circumstance, was the escape of the actual murderer. There would be few people abroad in that weather to observe a skulker.

If he was clever at hiding, making use of ditches and hedge-rows, the missing man might make his way for miles across country, with night coming on, and never be seen.

By saving the window for his own emergency and relying on the repaired Daimler below in case he could get to it, Charles had perhaps materially aided the murderer's escape—though it would have been impossible to persuade the opinionated Jepson to look further than the chauffeur at the time; and after the arrival of the constable all appearances would have been against a flat assertion from the accused that a closed window had been used as an exit by a vanished, semi-legendary man.

Charles perceived with a considerable shock that he was fairly up against it, and that he had connived at the departure of the only two people whose testimony could have any immediate effect on the course of the Law—Nancy and the murderer himself. Bessie's story of the short stout man was unsupported, even denied, by the landlord of the inn. Nancy's sworn statement that she had been alone in the writing-room with the chauffeur when the shot was fired might be all that Charles could produce against Jepson's damning evidence of his proximity to the body and the gun wrapped in

his handkerchief—and he shrank with all his soul from calling Nancy into the witness box in his defence.

His name, when it came out as it must, would of course weigh heavily in his favor, but his presence here in the livery of his own chauffeur when he was believed to be in Edinburgh could never be rationally explained by a man on trial for his life. It would only hint at some unguessable secret in the private life of a public man—and it would probably be turned into some ugly clandestine affair in which Nancy might be thoroughly mired.

*Why wasn't I born a chauffeur!* How lightly he had said that, and how long ago! The odd part of it was that, all things considered, the real Gerrard might stand a better chance now than Charles in Gerrard's shoes, with the mystery of his crazy incognito complicating the issue.

He had still one hope in a thousand—through that window and to Mortimer in Downing Street before the Inspector came. Mortimer might be able to haul him out of this somehow, if only he could get up to London tonight.

Once in the Daimler which waited below with her tank newly filled, and he might get

away in the dark and the rain. The village police would be put to it to find a vehicle to follow him at once. He cursed the Daimler's custom-made conspicuousness. She would be easy to follow, on a clear road. But if she behaved herself now they could hardly keep him in sight if he once got fairly away.

Charles was sitting almost midway of the room, between the fireplace and the door, and practically under the naked electric bulb. At the passage door Jepson held the constable with his glittering eye. He had gone back to the beginning and was working up to it—it appeared that he had wakened that morning with a premonition and had blamed it on the weather. . . .

Charles measured distances with his eye.

Twice as far from the constable to himself as from himself to the bedroom door. That room was dark, and so the window would still guide him by its glimmer.

The lighted room in which they sat was the real problem. There was no button on the bulb, and the switch was under the constable's elbow.

He caught Mrs. Martin's eye.

"Will you trust me?" he asked, very low.

She nodded. At least she had been right

about one thing—he was no chauffeur. His voice now added to the puzzle of his ever growing resemblance to the man she was convinced he must be. But whether he was a portrait she had seen at the Academy or a blurred snapshot in an evening newspaper, and what the connection of either might be, she could not have told.

"Then just keep quiet—don't argue—and leave it to me."

She glanced inquiringly toward the bedroom, and Bessie turned her head a little to hear. She had remained unobtrusively beside the fire where his orders had sent her.

"It's London tonight or I'm done," he said.

"They'll be sure you did it if you try to——"

"They're sure now. They may stumble over the other fellow if they have to look." But with an odd, numb sense of unreality, he was not sure. . . .

"You'd better be quick, sir!" Bessie implored beneath her breath.

Charles rose, casually, lighting a cigarette. The constable glanced over his shoulder at the movement, saw him standing quietly by his chair, saw Mrs. Martin seated between him and the hearth, and Bessie on her knees by the

fire. Not hatching anything. Hopelessly buttonholed by Jepson and the repetitious Tompkins, he turned his broad back again on the room, blocking the exit—Nancy's bag was still in his hand, with the key to the other passage door.

"Give me the poker," murmured Charles after a moment.

Unquestioning, Bessie rose and picked up the coal-hod. The poker hung inconspicuously from her other hand. She passed close to him—their fingers brushed——

"Stand clear, child."

Charles whipped the poker through the defenceless light bulb, which broke with a loud pop. He was through the open bedroom door in the dark long before the constable, who stumbled over Bessie and the coal-hod cunningly placed, reached the spot where he had stood.

The firelight flared up on confusion, assisted in a moment by the constable's electric torch. The glowing end of Charles' cigarette showed faintly on the carpet beside the body.

"What's going on here?" shouted the constable. "Block the passage, 'e can't get out that way! We've got 'im—*where's the light in 'ere?*"

" 'E smashed my light!" Jepson was dancing with excitement in the far doorway. " 'E smashed by new electric bulb! Bessie, bring a candle! *Bessie!*"

"He's not 'ere!" the constable discovered incredulously in the bedroom. "Hullo, 'e's tried the window! *Where's the light, I say!*"

"Coming, constable, coming—" Jepson trotted fussily to his aid, stepping gingerly past the body in the doorway, which lay so gruesomely quiet amid all the row. " 'E never passed *me,* 'e didn't! 'E never went down the passage—the switch is 'ere by the door—there we are, constable——"

The window stood wide open, with rain beating in on the carpet.

"Tried the window," said the constable again, regretfully, and his broad shoulders filled the opening.

"Then 'e's broke both 'is legs!"

"Hi!" yelled the constable suddenly, as his torch explored the courtyard. The Daimler was getting under way below and the Inspector was nowhere to be seen. "Hi, stop that car——!"

He turned, almost knocking Jepson down, and tore back through the writing-room and down the front stairs at a tramping run, to en-

counter the Inspector coming in through the bar, piloted by the breathless Henry. Jepson followed scuttlingly, and Tompkins could be heard remonstrating in the rear. . . .

In the stillness that was left, Bessie and Mrs. Martin shared a window of the writing-room, peering down into the courtyard.

"He's got away," said Mrs. Martin, after a minute, as two torches entered the courtyard from the road.

"They couldn't 'ave stopped 'im," said Bessie tremulously, her hands cupped against the pane.

"But can they catch him? Look—they're backing out that little car!"

"It's the one those two came in—*it's* not much good!"

The Citroën, blocked by Johnny's two-seater, since departed, had been abandoned in the shed by its owner, who had apparently chosen to make his escape on foot, under the protection of the storm and the oncoming darkness. It would doubtless be quite possible for him, thought Mrs. Martin, to make his way along the hedges and ditches to the nearest railway station—there was none for Safferton Medway. Meanwhile his damnable little car, driven by the young constable at whom

the Inspector shouted advice or encouragement as it shot past, took the road sturdily on the trail of the red Daimler.

"They can go—those little cars," worried Mrs. Martin.

"'E's got a chance now, ma'am." Bessie turned back into the room, and went to pick up the live cigarette from the carpet, bending awkwardly from the waist. "Lucky Mr. Jepson didn't know about that roof—I noticed it last week when I was washing the window." She looked thoughtfully at the cigarette, and then dropped it on the fire. "The other fellow—*'e* knew it was there and booked that room on purpose."

"I shall go mad," announced Mrs. Martin to the incurious night. "What's become of Nancy? What's become of the girl that was here?"

"Oh, *'er!"* said Bessie unflatteringly. *"She's* safe enough—with that young gentleman."

"What young gentleman?"

*"'Im* as turned up in a two-seater—'e called Mr. Gerrard Charles, so 'e must be all right. And the two of 'em 'opped it in 'is car the minute all this 'appened."

"But who was he? Where did he come from?"

Bessie could not say. But she held stubbornly to her opinion that he was Charles' kind, and all right.

The Inspector's voice came up to them, through the open door. He was shouting down the telephone, trying to get through to Scotland Yard.

"I shall go mad," moaned Mrs. Martin, staring out at the empty courtyard, running with rain. Nancy's disappearance with the mysterious stranger was the last straw. *Charles.* The name knocked uselessly at her brain. They called him Charles. He called her Nancy. *Who was Gerrard?*

"You won't be wantin' anything for a while, ma'am? I got things to see to downstairs."

"What's that?" Mrs. Martin turned and looked vaguely at the odd little figure standing white-faced on the hearth—and it seemed suddenly a very human presence, very good to have about on a night like this. "Come back when you can—I'm not going to sit here alone all night."

"Oh, no, ma'am—we'll make you comfortable," Bessie reassured her. "Per'aps you'd like to take dinner up 'ere, ma'am?"

"Dinner!"

Mrs. Martin looked over her shoulder at the

Thing on the floor; the still, outflung hand casting no shadow in the firelight because of the stream of light from the bedroom beyond.

"Oh, Lor', ma'am, I meant in there—" Bessie gestured toward the bleak bedroom across the passage where the dressing-case had come to rest. "The Inspector will be up in a minute—and I'll 'ave them set out something 'ot from the kitchen on a tray." She crossed the passage and turned on another sick white light in the bedroom—another electric bulb hanged by the neck from the middle of the ceiling. "You just wait in 'ere, ma'am, till the Inspector comes."

"I suppose I'll have to see him, and answer a lot of fool questions."

Mrs. Martin sank heavily on the edge of the bed, with a sigh, and heard the little maid's footsteps die away. . . .

Down the back stairs went Bessie, furtively, avoiding the notice of the Inspector at the telephone. Henry was holding forth excitedly to a little knot of open mouthed people in the scullery. She faced a long martyrdom of questions and speculation, because she too had been privileged to behold the principals in the crime. Her back ached and her bones were lead. She opened the door on to the courtyard

and stood gazing out into the darkness which had received him, unaware that the rain blew in against her apron and cotton clad ankles, vaguely seeking a breath of fresh air. . . .

"Who's that? Hi, shut that door!" shouted someone in the scullery.

" 'Ope 'e don't get soaked," thought Bessie, and turned back into the peevish, unconsidering life of the inn.

# PART THREE

## MIDNIGHT IN DOWNING STREET

# I

IT was midnight of that rainy Monday in May, and still pouring. London's streets were deserted, with gleaming, rain-washed pavements.

Big Ben performed his sonorous duty to all Westminster.

*Twelve o'clock,* he said in his mighty voice, like none other in the world because of a very special sort of crack he has achieved all down one side, which makes him rather hoarse and a bit humorous. *And all is well—so far as I can see from here,* he added to himself, being a Parliamentary clock and never too sanguine on that account. *Mind you, I don't say there isn't trouble somewhere on the other side of the River, but that's none of my business, and Whitehall looks all right from here, though it's not what you might call a fine night—I don't suppose the Prime Minister is asleep yet, they say he keeps very late hours with nobody but me to look after him—of course there's the dog, but I don't suppose he has much influ-*

*ence—he can't tell time—let's hope the P.M. heard me, but you never can tell on a night like this—hullo, there's a car coming across the Bridge from the Surrey side—that's rather odd—why, bless my soul,* said Big Ben, for he has to talk to himself between chimes in order to keep awake, *bless my soul, it's turning into Downing Street—that's most unusual—oh, well, there's bound to be a bobby there, he'll deal with it. . . .*

He dozed a little, dark faced, for the House had risen.

Within the unpretentious walls of Number 10 the Prime Minister finished his deep breathing exercises in front of an open window, supervised by the white wire-haired terrier Peter, and stood a moment at the casement, waiting to say good-night to Big Ben. A filthy night it was, too.

The voice of the old clock which, once heard, would be recognizable in Zanzibar, spoke to him in its dear, hoarse music. He stood counting—this was ritual. Nine—ten—eleven—twelve. Got a bit of a cold, Ben had, poor old chap. Mortimer had a great tenderness for Ben—the epitome, the quintessence, the last word in clocks. Some day he must pay him a visit, up in the tower. He wanted to see about

that crack. They said you could put your hand in it. . . .

With a sigh, the Prime Minister turned away from the window and put out the last light and got creakingly into bed. Peter pattered after him and lay down with a soft flump on his own cushion at the foot, stretched his nose along his paws, and was off. Mortimer, who had lately been forbidden to read in bed, lay on his back, his tired eyes still open on the dark, and thought about things.

Tomorrow was his day for visiting his brother Edmund, who had a place near Bushey Park, and he hoped it would be fine, because of the deer—rather a bore, Edmund was, unless you could see the deer on the way—that came of marrying a stupid woman who let her figure go and would think a touch of rouge immoral at her age—Edmund had begun by being the clever one, and now look at him, just a middle-aged bore without even a hobby—she had never been pretty, not even at her wedding—it did seem as though a woman could manage to be pretty at her own wedding—Cicely Gordon—would he ever forget the vision of Cicely Gordon swishing down the aisle in her grandmother's lace, to Charles at the altar, ten, twelve, good heavens, fourteen

years ago—God, what a beauty Cicely was, even now—coming out into the garden, bare-headed, and Charles tossing that rose to her—Charles wasn't a bore—Charles had hobbies—delphiniums and dogs—Charles knew horses too—there wasn't much wrong with Charles, except that he spoilt Cicely—she ought to stay at home more—Switzerland—it wasn't as though she took cures—like poor old Stephenson—he was very seedy again—thank God there was some one to take his place—how unimportant, after all, was any single man in the great machine—always some one to take a man's place—except Charles, of course—if anything happened to Charles—no one—ever—to fill Charles' place—what morbid ideas one got, when one couldn't read in bed—now he might dream all night about groping through a world with no Charles in it—an endless procession of men with qualifications, none of them Charles—what a nightmare—how it rained tonight—what did the deer do when it rained?—(this occupied his ambling mind for several minutes)—if only Edmund would take an interest in something—collect stamps, or Bow china—or raise Angora rabbits. . . .

Mortimer had achieved that inert state of semi-slumber which numbs an unquiet mind

when he became unwillingly conscious of a tapping at his chamber door. Peter roused too and began to bark, under the impression that he was thus preserving his master's repose.

"What is it?" mumbled Mortimer, suddenly sleepier than he had been at any time since going to bed, and wishing to God he could be let alone.

The apologetic voice of Albert the footman came through the door.

"It's Mr. Woodville and a young lady, sir. They say they must see you at once."

"What's that?" groped Mortimer, thinking of telegrams. "Be quiet, Peter!—Put it on my desk, I'll look at it in the morning."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but it's young Mr. Woodville—downstairs. And there's a lady with him." Albert couldn't seem to get over this.

There was a long silence within the room, while Mortimer pulled himself up out of arrears of sleep. He was always behind with his sleep, and woke painfully—once collected, he could outlast anyone.

Not since the good old days of the War had he been knocked up in the middle of the night like this—somebody down stairs wanting to

see him?—very odd—a dream, perhaps—he should not have taken that second drop of kümmel. . . .

"Excuse me, sir——"

What's that—not a dream—somebody waking him—but the War was over. . . .

"They insist that it's exceedingly important, sir—practically a matter of life and death, I understand——"

Albert, youngest of the Downing Street footmen, could hardly remember the good old days as such, and was making his own private reservations about so theatrical a statement.

The bedroom door opened suddenly close to his deferential nose and the Prime Minister stood there, clad in a nice blue dressing-gown, but lacking his slippers.

The room was dark behind him, so that he blinked in the light of the passage.

"I can't find my slippers," he complained mildly. "I think the dog must have had them. Will you—" He gestured vaguely toward the dark bedroom.

"I'm very sorry to disturb you, sir," began the youngest footman earnestly, blinking, in his turn, at the blue dressing-gown. "But it seems to be rather a serious matter, sir——"

"I want my slippers," said the Prime Min-

ister, still mildly, and added, in a grieved tone, "It would be a very serious matter indeed, if I caught my death just now, with Labour what it is——"

Albert dived desperately into the bedroom and switched on the light. Peter barked at him joyously—what sort of game was this? Peter couldn't remember the stirring nights of the War either.

"Be quiet, Peter," bade the Prime Minister perfunctorily, and Peter sat down, watchful, but pleasant enough, while Albert found the slippers side by side under the bed as they should have been, and carried them across the room to where the Prime Minister stood waiting.

"Oh," said Mortimer, blinking at his bedlight and then at the slippers. "There they are—funny, I couldn't see 'em. Now—" He had got them on, with Albert's help. "That's better—thanks very much. Now, who was it you said wanted to see me?"

"Mr. Woodville, sir," repeated Albert patiently. "And a young lady."

"A young lady?" The Prime Minister strove anxiously for a bird's-eye view of himself in the blue dressing-gown.

"It's the young Mr. Woodville, who is a re-

lation of Mr. Gordon's, I believe, sir." Albert jogged his attention gently.

"*Johnny* Woodville!" Mortimer emerged from the fog with a mental snap. "But you should have told me that in the first place!"

"Yes, sir," agreed Albert meekly, having done his best to.

"How was I to know—Good Lord it must be something about Charles! I'll go down at once—" He was on the way. "Where did you put them, Albert?"

"They're in the morning-room, sir."

Albert and Peter were both trying to keep up. The three of them scattered along the passage as though there was a fire, the Prime Minister leading by a length in the blue dressing-gown, with the nice blue-striped pyjamas underneath, one slipper flapping. Peter let out an excited yap.

"Sh!" said Albert, bringing up the rear.

"Yap! Yap!" said Peter.

"Be quiet!" said the Prime Minister, arriving at the door of the morning-room.

Peter slid into the room at his master's heels. Albert closed the door discreetly from the outside.

Footmen are not supposed to think. But across that blank, polished surface which was

Albert's official mind drifted a dim surprise. Midnight—a young lady in the morning-room—and the Prime Minister's pyjamas. . . .

The two weary figures at the end of the room straightened as Mortimer entered. Both of them were rather wet and blown about. He had no greeting for them save a question.

"Where's Charles?"

"At Safferton Medway," Johnny answered with equal terseness.

"Whatever's that?"

"A place," gasped Nancy, white with fatigue and strain.

His grey gaze knifed through her. Oh, yes—at the Grange last week—oh, yes, for years he'd seen her about the Grange—Nancy, they called her—where did she come into it?

"A place in Kent," she added lucidly, and collapsed on the edge of a chair.

"I never heard of it," snapped Mortimer. (Going to faint, probably. Girls did. He thought with regret of Cicely's ripe presence of mind. Where was she?)

"What's happened? What's he doing in a place like that? How did he get there? Is anything wrong? Did he send you here?

What *is* all this about?" demanded Mortimer —a hen with a lost chick.

"One minute, sir," begged Johnny, praying that Mortimer would offer him a chair and a drink soon. "It's such a silly story I hardly know where to begin, but——"

"It began with an insane joke of Charles' about this new job of mine," Nancy cut in desperately, with a real effort to pull herself together. "I'm travelling companion to Mrs. Martin, you know—and last week at the Grange Charles said wouldn't it be fun if he could come along disguised as the chauffeur on the motor trip, and I—well, I just laughed it off."

"Naturally," said Mortimer.

"Yes, but then Charles seems to have lost his mind and borrowed one of Rogers' uniforms and intercepted the agency car in front of our hotel today, driving his own new Daimler——"

"But you don't mean that Charles actually—" began Mortimer.

"Yes, he did!" cried Nancy impatiently. "He put on Rogers' livery and said his name was Gerrard, and reported for duty this morning at the hotel. Mrs. Martin thought he looked like someone she ought to know, but she

couldn't place him—everything might have gone off all right if the car hadn't broken down at this hole called Safferton Medway——"

"But I don't understand," fumbled poor Mortimer, taken unawares at midnight with Charles' madness. "He might have known something *would* go wrong—he might have known he couldn't just——"

"I don't see why anything was bound to go wrong, sir," Johnny defended Charles instantly, as he always did if anyone else attacked him. "Nancy was thoroughly chaperoned, and all he wanted was a sort of lark——"

*"Lark!"* snapped Mortimer, blaming Johnny for the word, and never Charles. "Well, what happened?" he barked at Nancy, sunk into the big chair now, very flat and white.

"Well, you see," said Johnny, as she seemed unable to go on, "this fellow got himself murdered, and then——"

"Murdered!" It's an ugly word at best. At midnight, with Charles missing, it was intolerable.

"At the inn where we had stopped for repairs," put in Nancy foolishly.

"And the local constabulary are trying to

pin it on to Charles," said Johnny, driving home the horror.

"Pin what on Charles?" queried Mortimer, determined to keep his head. "The murder?"

"Yes. And it looks rather bad, sir. So we came straight to you."

"But—how could they pin it on Charles?" inquired Mortimer reasonably.

"Because the corpse came barging into our rooms to die!" cried Nancy with impatience—it was no time for his Cabinet manner!

"You can get him out of it, can't you, sir?"

"Get him out of what?"

It could not, would not dawn on Mortimer. You can't get a man out of bed in the middle of the night and expect him to assimilate at once that his dearest friend is accused of murder.

"Can't you understand, sir, he's under arrest!"

"Good God! What for?"

"Murder!" There was hysteria in Nancy's voice.

That word again. Mortimer put both hands to his fine white head.

"I am having a bad dream," he said sanely.

"So is Charles," Johnny took him up grim-

ly. "You see, they found him with the gun in his hand——"

*"Gun!"*

"The gun that killed the man."

"That was my fault," confessed Nancy, a little wide of the mark. "If I hadn't picked the beastly thing up off the floor——"

Mortimer made a mighty effort.

"Let's sit down," he suggested, and Johnny folded up in the nearest chair. Mortimer seated himself, wrapped in the blue dressing-gown. "Now, let's start all over again. Johnny. Tell me what you know about this monstrous thing from beginning to end. Were you there when it happened?"

"Not exactly. You see, sir, I'd left Nancy and Charles together in a sort of writing-room upstairs at the inn—Mrs. Martin was having a bit of shut-eye in a room across the passage—and I went down to the bar for a drop of Scotch before starting back to Town in all that weather. I——"

"How did you come to be at the inn?"

A glance flashed between the boy and Nancy. No good beginning on *that.*

"If you don't mind, sir, that's got nothing to do with it now."

"Very well, go on."

"Well, while I was sitting in the bar something went off somewhere—I thought it was outside, but the proprietor and his pal buzzed off up stairs shouting for the police—I'm not accustomed to hearing guns fired in country inns, and while I was trying to see something to account for it in the road, Nancy came flying down the back stairs and said a man had been murdered——"

"Charles sent me to catch Johnny—he wanted me to get away in Johnny's car before anybody found the body in that room—we neither of us realized then how serious it was going to be——"

"But we found that out jolly soon, because the Boots came tearing down after a policeman, screaming that Charles had killed a man —and when that Bobby arrived he'd find Charles *with* the gun *by* the body—which means that if the other fellow did get clean away Charles will be arrested and clapped into the village gaol."

"Johnny said you were the only person who could save Charles now and——"

"And so we pushed off in my car before anybody could stop us and here we are. Of course the real murderer may be lurking somewhere about the countryside—and if Charles

can only keep still until they find him—" Johnny strove for self-control with a cigarette, which only showed how his hands were shaking.

"But suppose they don't find him—" wavered Nancy.

"Well, even if they do, eventually, it will want a bit of doing still to keep the police and the newspapers from finding out who Charles is in the meantime. And that's where you come in, sir."

"He hasn't told them who he is?" Mortimer had been listening like a steel trap, wholly Prime Minister now.

"He's going by the name of Gerrard, sir."

"But surely that's very foolish of him—surely Charles' name — Charles' reputation——"

"Charles' reputation wears a chauffeur's kit at the moment, sir, don't forget that!"

At last it dawned.

"Good God—Charles is being held for murder, and he's wearing the livery of his own chauffeur!"

"You've got it, sir. Can't you see the newspapers—*Noted M.P. Masquerading as Chauffeur Arrested for Murder*——"

"But this is—" Mortimer groped for words. "This is—unthinkable!"

"You've got to do something quick!" said Nancy.

"Whom did he kill—that is—who's dead?"

"We don't know."

"Don't know!" repeated Mortimer incredulously.

"Nobody knows that, sir—it's just a stray corpse that's been wished on to Charles. And there must be evidence to hang him!" cried Johnny, overtaken by panic, and dropped his face in his hands.

"Johnny!" sobbed Nancy. (*'E'll 'ang for this!* It was ringing in Johnny's ears too, then.)

"Hang—*Charles!*"

There are technicalities about circumstantial evidence, but this was the middle of the night and details escape one in the first shock of calamity. The Prime Minister got up and began a monotonous pacing in the dim room. The War? A vast, vague mumble of distant disaster—tragedy on a scale too colossal to sharpen to pain. The War had focussed itself on one slim khaki clad figure. There had been bad nights then—telegrams and alarums and midnight meetings and regiments wiped out

and the eternal mutter of guns—a terrible business—but there was just one man, one name, at the center of all one's fear and prayer. And now again it was Charles. Just Charles.

"Can't you—do something, Mr. Mortimer?" It was Nancy through drawn lips.

"But—" Mortimer threw out hands that were prayerful. "I'd have to be God to handle this!"

"You're Prime Minister," said the small, flat voice from her chair. "That's the next thing to it. Surely there's something you can do."

"Yes," said Mortimer. "Yes, by God—Webb and I between us——"

"Who's he?"

"Sir Gilbert Webb. Runs Scotland Yard. He'll know what to do. Wait here while I get him on the telephone——"

There was a knock on the door as he started toward it, Peter busily at his heels.

"Come in!" he snapped, striding forward.

It was Albert.

"Mr. Gordon has just arrived, sir, and——"

*"Charles!"* cried three separate voices.

"—and asked to use the telephone. He said——"

The Prime Minister had passed him like a breeze. ("Yap! Yap!" "Quiet, Peter!")

Nancy and Johnny straggled out into the middle of the room and stood there, stranded, staring at each other—two well brought up children who could not run loose about the Prime Minister's house now that Charles was safe.

## II

MORTIMER had not been able really to believe that Charles was wearing the familiar dark red livery of his own servants until he came upon what at first glance appeared to be Rogers at the telephone. Peter ran on ahead to sniff suspiciously at the black leggings and then went into small ecstasies of his own.

"Hullo, is that you, Higgins?" Charles was saying into the telephone, and Mortimer paused to look at him with mingled relief and anxiety. "I'm at Number 10. Send Rogers here in the two-seater, quick—just as fast as possible.—Good evening, sir," he murmured politely as his eye caught Mortimer's. "Higgins, tell him to drive into the Parade Ground instead of Downing Street—they'll let him in that way. If there's any question, he's to say that he had orders and is expected. And if anybody asks for me there tonight, I'm in Paris. Right. That's all. Oh, Higgins—go

to bed.—I said, go to bed." He put down the instrument. "Sorry, sir—I had to get through to the flat at once." He bent to Peter's capers. "Well, little dog——"

"Yap! Yap! Yap!" exulted Peter.

"Hush," said Charles. "I've gone to Paris."

Mortimer glanced behind him. Albert was vanishing tactfully toward a green baize door. (Something going on. But Albert had read a great many sixpenny novels and was convinced that Charles had been on a secret mission for the Prime Minister, disguised as his own chauffeur.)

"In here," said Mortimer briefly, indicating the open door of the morning-room.

Charles had not expected to see them there, of course, but he was long past astonishment tonight. He looked at them humorously, depreciating the drama of his entrance, theatrically casual, himself, amid their tension.

"Hello!" said Charles. "Filthy night, isn't it!"

But it fooled nobody. He stood before them, muddy to the knees and damp around the shoulders, for he had not been wearing the mackintosh when he jumped off that roof—very tired, and smiling, in borrowed clothes—to their excited imaginations a man not quite

sure of his life. Their eyes caressed him—that slim, weary body, held so gallantly, which they each desired to seize with frenzied, protecting hands, futilely, lest it be taken from them. He was theirs—passionately they owned him at that moment; theirs, that nothing should snatch away to gaol. The impulse to touch him, to hold on to him, to satisfy themselves that he was there and whole, under their jealous hands, struck through them all. But nobody moved. And only the Prime Minister played up.

"My dear boy, this has given me the devil of a scare," he remarked plaintively as he closed the door.

"I haven't had too good a time myself," said Charles. His eyes rested on Nancy, who stood silent on the hearth-rug, her cold hands clasped together, staring at him. "However did you two get here?"

"It was Johnny's idea."

"Funny, I thought of it too. Johnny, I think I've been followed. Go be Sister Anne out a front window, will you?"

"Followed? Charles, for God's sake what's happened? How did you get away?"

"That was Bessie. She came to the rescue."

"Bessie?"

"The maid."

"Oh, *that* woman of mystery!" murmured Johnny, remembering his own experience in the passage.

"But, Charles—!" begged Nancy whitely.

"She showed me how the other fellow got away. Through the window. Have a look outside, Johnny—some bloodhound is after me in a small car."

"Through that room to the front of the house," said Mortimer, indicating a door, and Johnny rushed away.

"Well, Prime Minister, this is a pretty state of affairs," remarked Charles cheerfully, finding for himself one of Mortimer's cigarettes in a mother-of-pearl box on the table. "Have you ever been chased along the Old Kent Road on a night like this?"

"Never."

"Lord, what a narrow squeak! Once I thought he had me, on the bridge at Rochester. And once I thought I'd lost him, among the trams near the *Elephant and Castle*—they put the trams to bed somewhere around there," he explained. "Flocks of them, all going bye-bye—it's a pretty sight. But I looked back just as I turned into Whitehall and thought I saw him on the Bridge. He'll be a Chief

Inspector very soon, that fellow! He hangs on." He turned to Nancy swiftly, unable longer to pretend that it was not something rather special to find her here. "What sort of time did you have?" he asked, just for the sake of speaking to her, looking at her, proving to himself that she was really there.

"Oh, all right." Her quick smile was a little wan. "The policeman outside the house was wonderful!"

"He didn't stop you!"

"No, but he was just passing the door as we drove up, and of course he recognized Johnny, and with some surprise. So Johnny said, 'Hello, MacGregor'—lucky it was one he knew!—and MacGregor said, 'Good evening, sir,' trying not to *look* surprised, and Johnny said, 'There's hell to pay, MacGregor—got to see the Prime Minister,' and MacGregor said, 'Well, it's getting a bit lateish for that, sir'—and Johnny said, 'Mr. Gordon sent us,' and then MacGregor unbent and said, 'Oh, *him!* Right you are, sir!'—and waved us toward the door!"

Charles' laughter, so ready and so natural, fell oddly on Mortimer's ears. He could laugh! Because that chit sat there, adoring him, and talking absurdly like a policeman,

he could laugh! There must be something in her, who could make a man laugh like that, when he was wanted for a murder he hadn't committed. Mortimer searched her white face mercilessly. Not pretty. Never pretty. But with great honest eyes, and a lovely length of limb, stretched in the big chintz chair. Perhaps he had never done her justice. . . .

"He must have spotted the livery and thought I was Rogers, when I crossed your lights," said Charles. "Rogers will be here, wearing his, in a few minutes—they're going to find it a little confusing——"

Johnny returned in some excitement, waking Peter, who had subsided, exhausted with emotions, beside the door.

"Charles, there's a Bobby driven up in a small car and he's talking to MacGregor outside!"

"I thought so," said Charles. "He'll get the V.C. one day, that man!"

"*Could* it be somebody all the way from Safferton Medway?" shivered Nancy.

"It could."

"Charles, you never let that ridiculous little car keep you in sight all the way to Town!"

Johnny received the look of mingled chagrin and reproach which he deserved.

"The Daimler has had a frog in her throat all day—coughed and wheezed, with no speed in her, and no grip to the road. I'm lucky not to be in the ditch. Now, look here, all of you. The chances are they haven't got the number of my car which was at Safferton Medway. I don't think he got near enough to read it on the way to town, so as it stands outside now, it's just any muddy Daimler. Remember, then, Rogers drove me in that car to Dover this morning to catch the Channel boat. I gave him an important message to deliver here. He was delayed on the road and has only just arrived with it." He turned to Mortimer. "If I may have a bit of plain paper, sir, I'll write it out now."

"I must say all this was very careless of you, Charles," said Mortimer severely, as he rang the bell. "And in your own county, too. You're known by sight in half a dozen towns in Kent, and——"

"But not in Canterbury, sir, that was the idea! I know, I know, I'm any kind of a fool you like, but that doesn't get us any further now! I shall never stop kicking myself for mixing Nancy up in a thing like this, though—you must take care of her somehow!"

"You rang, sir?" Albert at the door.

"Mr. Gordon wants a bit of plain notepaper and a pen."

"Very good, sir."

"And when Rogers comes, show him up here immediately."

"Very good, sir." Albert went.

"I can keep things quiet for a time, I suppose," continued Mortimer, "pending an investigation by the Home Office—Webb will know how to manage that. But how is it all going to end, my boy, if they're really on your trail? I can't just rule out your corpse, you know, it's got to be accounted for somehow."

"It's not my corpse, far from it, and they're likely to turn up the real murderer if they have to go on looking. When they had me they were satisfied, but this will stretch them in time to pick him up, perhaps. That's a good idea of yours about the Home Office. Let them worry it out, they've got nothing to do!"

"No, Charles, we've none of us got anything to do but haul you out of scrapes!" retorted the Prime Minister unfairly, much as a Spartan mother smacks her just rescued child, for sheer relief at having it between her hands again. "But I still don't see——"

"Oh, come, I haven't been as much bother as all that, have I, now?" objected Charles

with all his exasperating charm. "And after the way we nursed poor old Stephenson through that nasty business with his son, five years ago——"

"Still, even Stephenson's son stopped at murder!" Mortimer pointed out.

"Very considerate of him, I always thought!"

Albert returned, still unflurried by these chicaneries in Downing Street, to say that there was a constable down stairs who wished to see the man who had driven the Daimler. Albert laid the note-paper with pen and ink on a little table, and placed a chair, tactfully, in the silence the Prime Minister allowed to endure for several seconds.

"Shut him up somewhere till I send for him."

"Very good, sir."

Albert withdrew.

"But you can't let him see Charles!" cried Nancy in a panic. "You've got to send him away at once!"

"My dear girl, I can't order a constable out of the house!"

"Why can't you?"

It is always an exasperating retort in the best of circumstances.

Charles' head was bent above his message, at the table. Mortimer turned to Johnny with a gesture of despair, mutely eloquent. What was the use of trying to talk to even the best of them as though they had brains? You couldn't argue with them and you could not trust them. You gave them an inch, put yourself ever so little in their power, and what happened? Look at Charles. Look at this girl, making a fool and possibly a martyr out of him, as this preposterous situation gathered impetus. Charles, the nearest thing he had to a son, brought into the very shadow of the gallows by a whim which had for its origin this level-eyed, straightforward seeming young person, as different from dear, spoilt Cicely as any woman could be—yet just as dangerous. What would Cicely say to this? Where *was* Cicely all this time? Had they all forgotten her? Cicely would be frantic. Charles—accused of murder. A constable down stairs—*Charles*. . . .

"The fellow's only doing his job, Nancy," Charles was saying as he wrote. "The Prime Minister can't interfere with that, you know."

"Do you mean to tell me that the Prime Minister can't call off a country constable if he tries?" she demanded scornfully.

"That's a nice point, sir!" Charles looked up, full of an academic interest.

"Can't you?" she insisted.

"Certainly not," said Mortimer stiffly, resenting her cool assumption that the Prime Minister was God. She thought she could run Charles' head into the noose, and then fall back on Government to get it out. They were all alike—women—all taking a childish viewpoint of such things, all thinking that because a man was Prime Minister——

"What a government!" said Nancy, as might have been expected.

She was not lovely as she stood there truculently on his hearth-rug, a damp hat pulled down over her white, smudged face. His thoughts flew back to Cicely, with her fragile clothes and her dainty wit, and that look in her eye which put a man on his mettle even when he was rising seventy. This girl, who wore brown boots with mud on them and couldn't talk sensibly—where did she come in? It seemed to him that Charles and Cicely had begun to overdo it.

"To tell the truth," said Charles thoughtfully, biting his pen, "I rather like the Government."

"I suppose your grandmother was one of

those women who ran up the steps of the guillotine laughing and kissing her hand to her friends in the tumbril below!" flared Nancy, frightened out of her wits by their inactivity.

Charles grinned at her with undisguised affection.

"You know perfectly well who my grandmother was," he said.

"Isn't anybody going to take this seriously till the rope is round his neck?" She walked up to Mortimer, nearly as tall as he and with her grey eyes blazing in a chalky face. "Johnny and I risked our worthless necks to get to you tonight—*you,* because we counted blindly on you to do something to get Charles out of this! *He* counted on you, or he wouldn't have come here too, when he got away. Are you going to just stand there and let them *take* him now? Charles didn't kill that man and he isn't going to gaol! You can do *something*—you must! What's the good of being Prime Minister if you can't get rid of one country constable!"

"That's another nice point," admitted Mortimer, touched, reluctantly beginning to admire, and Johnny glowed with pride of her, who dared to talk so to old Mortimer.

Charles blotted the message which he had

sent the Prime Minister from Dover that morning, and laid it out to wait for Rogers, who had brought it.

"There you are, sir—most important."

Mortimer peered at it, for his long sight was as good as it ever was.

*"Exaggeration is to paint a snake and add legs,"* he read, and felt hastily for his spectacles.

"It's a Chinese proverb," explained Charles. "Nearly all Chinese proverbs sound like code messages—sense, without rhyme or reason."

Albert knocked, and opened the door for Rogers.

He wore the duplicate of Charles' livery, twinned him in size and build, and gave everybody a nervous sensation of seeing double. His face at sight of Charles' wrecked suit was momentarily visited by an expression, instantly wiped out. He brought with him into the room a new sanity, and a heavenly aura of respectability.

"Now, Rogers—get this straight," said Charles. "You drove me to Dover this morning by way of Maidstone, to catch the boat. I left with you a message to be delivered here tonight. There it is." He pointed to it on the table. "You have just arrived with it in the

Daimler which stands outside in Downing Street with her feed-pipe choked up rather badly. You went through Maidstone and were not on the Rochester-Canterbury road to Dover either way. And I am in Paris. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," said Rogers without a flicker.

He had been expecting something like this in his prophetic soul, so he was not surprised. It had been his private opinion from the start that a man who steps out of his own class, even for a lark, is riding for a fall. This conviction did not go so far as to carry a criticism of Charles, who was the king and could do no wrong, and Rogers was sure that there must be reasons. But he was not surprised. How complete and thorough was the catastrophe he was still to learn.

Charles glanced from the chauffeur's speckless suit to his own muddy one. He had dropped off the roof into a puddle; and it had been necessary to keep the window beside him open for a clearer view of the unfamiliar road. His right sleeve was soaked.

"Yes, but you don't look as though you had driven up from Dover tonight. I'm afraid you'll have to get into these clothes." He glanced about him—a door at the other end

gave on to a little dark room. "Where's that policeman, sir? May we change in there?"

"My dear fellow," said Mortimer, superfluously, humorously, for all their disaster, "the house is yours!"

"Thanks very much. All right, Rogers——"

A man and his mirror, they started toward the other room.

Mortimer had an inspiration.

"I think perhaps a little drink——" he suggested. For since the arrival of Charles, so sane, so normal, so essentially Charles in spite of everything, the night had begun to slip back into proportion.

And while Johnny strove not to agree too eagerly——

"That's a good idea," said Charles. "Where's the light in here? Got it." The light went on in the other room. "We'll need a drink!" said Charles as Rogers closed the door behind them.

Mortimer rang.

"Let's all have a little drink," he said brightly, including Nancy in the new loving-kindness engendered by Charles' comparative safety in their protective midst. "And I'll go ring up Webb.—Albert, whiskey and soda for everybody. And take away that pen and ink."

## III

THE Prime Minister was a long time on the telephone, and by the time he had finished, Sir Gilbert Webb was thoroughly mystified and very wide awake. Sir Gilbert rang up Scotland Yard, and by the time he had finished there Scotland Yard had a new interest in life. A man named Douglas left for Safferton Medway within the hour. The Yard knew, if the Prime Minister did not, what that meant. A footling little murder at a place nobody had ever heard of had become the biggest and brightest job of the year.

Mortimer re-entered the morning-room to find Nancy and Johnny, good children, regarding the whiskey and soda wistfully from a respectable distance. Albert was just leaving the room.

"The next time I ring," the Prime Minister instructed him, "show that constable in here."

"Very good, sir."

The door closed quietly behind the footman.

Charles emerged from the other room wearing Rogers' dry suit, with Rogers at his heels looking very composed and trustworthy in the travel-worn one.

"Bring on your Bobby, sir. Here's my alibi. But first—thanks very much," as Mortimer put a glass into his hand.

"But you can't have the constable in here—he mustn't see Charles!" cried Nancy, bristling.

"He's not going to." Charles raised his glass solemnly. "To Bessie!" he said, and they all drank. "Now, Johnny—you two come along in here with me—we'll leave the door open and the light out—and don't anybody sneeze." He started for the other room, remembering to carry with him the tray which held the whiskey and siphon—strange objects for the morning-room in the middle of the night. "Come along, Peter—you come with us—you'll detract from the scope and dignity of the Prime Minister's lies."

Peter followed obligingly, wrapped up in this new game. Nancy and Johnny filed along behind, glasses in hand.

"I say—" Johnny halted suddenly in the doorway. "What about my two-seater outside? He may think that's dashed queer——"

"Clear out," bade the Prime Minister as he rang the bell. "I'll think of something."

Albert opened the door for the youthful Safferton Medway constable, who was considerably upset to see where the path of duty was leading him. But things had gone so far now that he had only one idea left, and that was to tread it to the end. MacGregor had not encouraged him, and Albert's evident low opinion of him had sapped the last of his zeal. For Albert, holding to his secret mission theory, was convinced that the police, as usual, were making fools of themselves.

The constable was thoroughly overcome by the Prime Minister's blue dressing-gown, and received a further shock at sight of Rogers, motionless, unconcerned as exhibit A in a glass case, awaiting dismissal in the middle of the room, wearing a claret-colored livery with silver buttons which had obviously made a long journey this wet night.

The Prime Minister greeted the constable pleasantly, but with noticeable reservations.

"Good evening, constable."

"Good evening, sir," replied the constable with difficulty.

"I understand you wanted to see this man?" He indicated the unblinking Rogers.

"I'm very sorry to trouble you, sir—but I am looking for an escaped murderer." And then he felt that perhaps that had not been the best possible beginning.

"Here?" said the Prime Minister, and his surprised grey gaze went subtly round the chaste walls of Number 10.

"His car is outside, I think, sir." The constable glanced uneasily toward Rogers. Here, indeed, were the clothes and the car, but not the face.

"Bless my soul!" said the Prime Minister, suitably shocked.

"He was driving a red Daimler, sir—like the one outside."

"You're sure he didn't nip into the Foreign Office across the way?" suggested the Prime Minister, having his little joke.

The constable did not see it.

"Constable on duty outside says the man who drove that car came in 'ere, sir." Again his glance sought Rogers.

"I—really, I think there must be some mistake," observed the Prime Minister urbanely. "This is Mr. Gordon's chauffeur."

"It's a chauffeur we're looking for, sir," said the constable doggedly. "I've followed 'im all the way from Safferton Medway—'e

was wearing a uniform identical to that one, sir."

"Dear me, this looks rather serious," murmured the Prime Minister, somehow conveying that he considered it not altogether so. "Rogers, were you—ahem—connected in any way with a murder on the way here?"

"No, sir," denied Rogers unemotionally.

Some men might have found Rogers' position a trifle disconcerting—to be thrust suddenly into the clothes and the tracks of a man wanted for murder. But not Rogers, whose mind worked busily behind his chauffeur's expression, marshalling Charles' defence. Rogers had known that something was bound to happen, but naturally his gloomiest prognostications had not gone as far as murder. He had no idea how Mr. Gordon had contrived to become involved in anything as bad as that, but if he had been told instead that Charles had run a man down and driven all four wheels over his body before witnesses he would still have stood up and called the man who said so a liar, and several other things besides.

"You are not asking me to entertain the idea that this is really the man you want," remonstrated Mortimer gently with the constable.

"Well, it looks very odd, I'll admit, sir," said the constable. " 'Ave I your permission, sir, to put a few questions to this man?"

"If you think it necessary, constable."

"Thank you, sir." Out came the notebook and pencil. He fastened a suspicious eye on Rogers. "Now, then—you drivin' that red Daimler outside?"

"I am."

"Been drivin' it all day?"

"Yes."

"Where did you come from when you drove up 'ere just now?"

"From Dover."

"Dover, eh? What road did you take?"

"Through Maidstone."

"Both ways?"

"Yes. Mr. Gordon prefers the Maidstone road."

"Mr. Charles Gordon, the M.P.?"

"That's right."

This had weight.

"And where is Mr. Gordon now?" pursued the constable.

"In Paris, I believe."

"Then you drove him to Dover to catch the Channel boat?"

"I did."

"And you came back alone?"

"Yes."

"Which road?"

"Through Maidstone again."

"You were not on the Canterbury road at all today?"

"No."

"You carried no passengers after you left Mr. Gordon?"

"No."

"Where were you between seven and eight o'clock this evening?"

"Near Ashford, I should think. The car had been giving trouble and I was delayed several times along the road."

"Where did you stop for dinner?"

"I didn't stop for it." Rogers was not to be trapped as easily as that. "I bought some buns and fruit at a shop and kept on."

"What was the 'urry, on a night like this?"

"I had a message from Mr. Gordon for the Prime Minister which was to be delivered tonight."

The constable looked to the Prime Minister for confirmation of this.

"Oh, yes—a most urgent message—" Mortimer glanced round for the paper Charles had written on, and Rogers drew his attention to

it where it lay on the corner of the table. "Would you like to see it?" Mortimer handed it over with guileless promptness.

"Thank you, sir."

The constable received the paper with respectful fingertips—it was disfigured with a realistic smudge from the damp right sleeve of Charles' coat as he wrote it. *Exaggeration is to paint a snake and add legs,* he read astonishingly, and below that a cabalistic signature.

"Of course it's in code," added Mortimer sweetly.

"Quite so, sir," agreed the constable, impressed, and turned again toward Rogers. "You were pretty late starting back, weren't you?"

"It was the car—she's been giving trouble all day—she kept sneezing. I lost a lot of time with a man at a crossroads petrol pump who thought he knew more than I did about the trouble, but he only made it worse and she balked again just this side of Hythe."

"It seems possible," remarked the Prime Minister diffidently to the Law, "that there were two red Daimlers abroad tonight. Did you take the number of the car you were following?"

"I just couldn't manage that, sir—she was pretty muddy, and he kept out of range."

"Could you not have lost your man and followed the wrong one here?"

"I don't say I didn't go wrong at the *Elephant and Castle,* sir—I thought once he'd given me the slip there, what with all the trams, but then I caught sight of what I thought was him again headed for Westminster—and it was *'im,"* with a jerk of his head toward Rogers. "It's very odd, I must say, sir—two of 'em the same night, and one of 'em a murderer—" He watched keenly, but Rogers did not blench. The constable turned apologetically back to the Prime Minister. "I'm exceedingly sorry about all this, sir——"

"A very strange coincidence," agreed Mortimer with bland sympathy. "Still it would have been most unusual if you had been able to keep your man in sight all the way."

"It was a good night for that, sir—no traffic to speak of. I had him, and no mistake, till those trams broke the scent, as you might say, sir. By the way—I suppose you know there's another car outside your 'ouse, sir?"

But Mortimer was equal to that now.

"Another?" He put up his eyebrows at

Rogers. "Rogers, did you notice another car——?"

"It's Mr. Woodville's two-seater, I believe, sir."

"Didn't they garage Mr. Woodville's car?" exclaimed the Prime Minister severely. "Dear, dear, some one has been very remiss about that. Rogers, before you go, will you just run Mr. Woodville's car round to the garage, they've forgotten it."

"Certainly, sir."

"It can't stand out on a night like this," complained the Prime Minister. "Mr. Woodville's gone to bed—Mr. Gordon's brother-in-law is stopping the night with me," he explained kindly to the constable.

"I see, sir," said the constable, properly impressed with Mr. Woodville.

"He expected to find Mr. Gordon still here," Mortimer was running on absently, to clinch it. "I was only too glad to put him up for the night, but I must say it's no way to treat his car. Rogers, it must be seen to at once."

"Very good, sir."

"Well, constable—" The Prime Minister smiled a pleasant dismissal, and set his finger on the bell. "I'm sorry not to be able to pro-

duce the criminal, but we're all fairly respectable here, I'm afraid."

"Thank you, sir, you've been very kind, sir——"

"It's all very curious, indeed," remarked Mortimer benignly, "but strange things do happen, as I'm sure you men on the Force know better than most of us—let me know what comes of it, I shall be most interested."

"Thank you, sir—good-night, sir——"

Albert was waiting. The door closed on them both.

Rogers and the Prime Minister looked at one another soberly, in the middle of the floor. Rogers was finding it an awesome thought that he and the Prime Minister between them had diddled a policeman. And Mortimer—who knows what state of hilarious chaos existed in Mortimer's Attic soul!

While that country constable, climbing back into the heroic Citroën in front of Number 10, Downing Street, turned over in his careful mind an adventure so perplexing that he had begun to wonder what on earth his report was going to look like.

How to state unemotionally in that dispassionate document, the report, that he had been to Downing Street after a murderer, and

seen the Prime Minister in his dressing-gown and slippers? And how to set down further that he had drawn an embarrassing blank, when in his secret soul lurked an heretical suspicion, too horrible to contemplate with equanimity, that the Prime Minister still knew a great deal more about this night's business than he had let on?

*A very curious coincidence,* said the Prime Minister. And there stood a chauffeur, Mr. Gordon's chauffeur, was it, in the right livery, not batting an eye. And that other car—it belonged to Mr. Gordon's brother-in-law, did it! Well, what about this Mr. Gordon himself? Paris, said the chauffeur. Suddenly, maybe. A message sent back in code. Well, that was all right. That was politics for you. But had he really gone to Paris?

The Citroën hummed busily across Westminster Bridge, headed back toward Safferton Medway. Scotland Yard would have a man there by now. This Mr. Gordon, who liked the Maidstone road. Well, what about him? An M.P., as anybody knew—a fine talker—thought very well of, he was—no end of a swell. Pal of the Prime Minister's, wasn't he? Well, that was all right. And he'd gone away that morning. Paris. Well, why not?

This fellow who'd been killed, now—comes through a door that's supposed to be locked, and gets shot in the throat. Well, then, whoever's in that room doesn't want to hear what he's got to say. That pretty handbag in the chair, and the lady vanished. (They could find her, though—the old one knew her mother.) Well, suppose the chauffeur and the lady had been together in that room, and this fellow opens the door and comes in—what was he going to say—or see? What did he know? Perhaps he knew why that chauffeur could suddenly speak like a gentleman. (That rankled. A man wearing leggings had no right to speak like that.) Perhaps the dead man knew that Gerrard wasn't really a chauffeur. Well, and if he wasn't a chauffeur he might be anybody at all—even a pal of the Prime Minister's.

At this point the constable became so appalled at the thing that was happening inside his own mind that he drew up by the side of the road and sat damply, with the rain beating against the flimsy curtains of the Citroën, trying not to think at all, and then trying furiously to think still further. But he could go neither forward nor back. The missing chauf-

feur was a gentleman. And there was a missing gentleman.

At last he drove on again, wondering what Scotland Yard would make of it; wondering again what his own report was going to look like; wondering most of all about the Prime Minister, who had been so exceedingly plausible in the blue dressing-gown; and flinching now and then from a growing uncertainty—had he or had he not been diddled in Downing Street?

## IV

MEANWHILE——

"I am only a simple M.P.," Charles was observing modestly—the three of them, and Peter, in the dark room beyond the guilelessly open door had heard everything. "I never dreamed of such talent for lying!"

"Two inspired liars, as a matter of fact," remarked Johnny, with an admiring glance at the immobile Rogers.

"Yes, that was quick thinking about buying buns at a shop," said the Prime Minister—an accolade. "I should never have thought of that."

"Thank you, Rogers." Charles laid his hand for an appreciable moment on the man's shoulder. "You'd better shove off now and change."

"Thank you, sir. Shall I take the same car I came in?"

"Take the Daimler," said Charles. "I've

had enough of her. You'll find some luggage—take it into the flat."

"Very good, sir."

Rogers went. It occurred idiotically to Nancy that he never did smile.

"I call it decidedly tiresome of you, Charles," complained the Prime Minister. "The one early night I've had in two months and you're had up for murder!"

"I'm frightfully sorry, sir—it is hard on you," Charles agreed sympathetically.

"Look here, what about Mrs. Whatsitsname down at the inn?" demanded Johnny suddenly. "Will they let her go, do you think? And if they did, what would she go in, because Charles has what she thought was her car. Or rather, Rogers has it now."

"They won't let her go," said Charles quietly. "She's their one link with Nancy."

"With me!"

"With Nancy!"

"We're not out of this yet. They've got Nancy's bag, and they can trace her and put her in the witness box and drag the whole thing out of her."

"They can't drag anything out of me I don't want to tell!" she denied promptly, with spirit.

"They mustn't try," said Charles, and looked at the Prime Minister.

"Charles, what's your theory about the real murderer?"

"Theory, sir? It's simple enough. He got away the same way I did—through the window of the room where the shot was fired. He must have known the roof was there when he booked that room."

"Where do you suppose he is now?"

"It's a good night for getting about unobserved. He'll find a railway station, if he's lucky, and vanish into thin air if they don't run him down first."

"How far is Safferton Medway from the railway?"

"Three miles. Now that I've disappeared and they've no one to gaol, they may pull themselves together and overtake him."

"And if they shouldn't?"

There was a little silence.

"Then, sir, it's going to be awkward. You've got to keep Nancy out of it somehow. You've got to keep it quiet."

"A lot depends, of course, on who the dead man is. What sort of chap was he?"

Charles passed a hand across his eyes. What sort of chap—? He remembered dark hair—

yes, he thought it was dark—and a gold cuff-link in the sleeve of that outflung hand. He remembered a dark suit—black boots, that he had stepped over on his way to the next room—but young or old, neat or shabby, rich or poor——

"I don't know," he said. "I didn't notice."

"His voice? You both heard his voice?" said Johnny.

Charles thought.

"He was screaming—mad with fright—I don't know," he said again.

"Then he might or might not have been some one who is going to matter," said Mortimer. "It——"

"His fingernails were dirty." Nancy was staring at the carpet. "I mean—they were the sort of fingernails which are never clean."

They waited.

"That's all," she said, with a little gesture of futility.

"That's a pretty good answer," said Mortimer.

"It was a rotten little car," contributed Johnny.

"I'd hate to run from a better one!" grinned Charles.

Nancy spoke again, eery-eyed.

"What do you suppose it was he hadn't told?" she said.

"Here, you'd better get some rest." Charles took her arm. "We'll all go along to the flat—your dressing-case has gone there already in the Daimler." A certain diffidence overtook him. He smiled doubtfully at her. "That is—there's Cicely's room—if you—I think you'd be comfortable there for the rest of the night."

"Quite," she smiled.

"There's a man gone down to that place from Scotland Yard," said Mortimer. "I've asked them to keep the whole thing dead quiet, and they'll let me know as soon as there's anything new. That's all we can do tonight."

Nancy went up to him, almost as tall as he was, and her eyes were misty in her white face. She laid her hands on his shoulders and put her lips to his cheek.

"Good-night," she said. "You're splendid."

He stood looking after her as she swung away from him to the door. *And so are you,* was in his mind, somewhat to his own surprise. Brown-haired, grey-eyed, thin, and young—he remembered her now. Dead tired, she was, but smiling. Worn out, but game. She had rowed him half off his feet when she thought he wasn't looking after Charles properly, and

now she made amends. *So are you, my girl!*

"I suppose the fun is all over for tonight," said Johnny, and gripped Charles' arm without shame. "And possession being what it is —let them try and gaol him now! Just let them try it on!"

Charles looked embarrassed and pleased.

"Good-night, sir—sleep well!" he said.

"You go to—" said Mortimer fondly. "Look here, I'm driving to Bushey Park tomorrow morning. I'll step off in Hanover Square on the way and let you know—whatever there is to know. Better than telephoning."

"Good," said Charles.

Nancy and Johnny had drifted toward the door with the dragging steps of weary children.

For a moment Charles hung on one foot before the older man. Gratitude for Mortimer's unquestioning loyalty in this unpardonable escapade; chagrin, future guilt, a dozen apologies; above everything, their love for one another, all awaited and all defied his utterance. They were English, and there were no words. But Charles, wanting words so badly . . .

"Coming, Charles?"

"Er—good-night, sir," said Charles again.

They clasped hands.

# PART FOUR

## BREAKFAST IN HANOVER SQUARE

# I

CHARLES sat alone at breakfast in the flat in Hanover Square, polishing off his first egg. He was attended by Higgins, who detected an escapade on somebody's part, and suspected Johnny.

Higgins had gone to bed as bidden the night before, and to sleep. He had wakened to find all three of the master's bedrooms occupied—Mr. Gordon and young Mr. Woodville each in his own, and a round-eyed housemaid reported Miss Nancy to be in possession of Mrs. Gordon's bed. The housemaid's theory was that Mr. Gordon had been compelled to intercept an elopement. Higgins, who had found Rogers' uniform on a chair in Mr. Gordon's room, was still wondering if anything so simple as an elopement would have required such a disguise.

It naturally occurred to nobody that Mr. Gordon might have had a willful adventure on his own. M.P.'s don't do such things. The

attitude of Charles' servants this morning was subtly sympathetic. Somebody had been inconsiderate enough to keep him up most of the night. Yet he was the first to appear, fresh and at peace with the world, at the breakfast table. A great man.

"Tea, sir?" said Higgins, watching Charles empty his cup.

"Thank you, Higgins."

Higgins poured a fresh cup of tea and proffered the toast rack.

"Did I or did I not see two eggs?" Charles inquired hopefully.

"You did, sir.'

Higgins produced the second.

"Did anyone hear us come in last night?"

"No, sir," said Higgins regretfully. "You were very quiet, sir."

"Believe it or not, Higgins, we were all perfectly sober."

"I don't doubt it, sir," said Higgins, surveying the breakfast.

"I hope—" Charles glanced over his shoulder at the sideboard, his own breakfast being a more or less stereotyped affair in Higgins' own hands. "—I hope you've got something nice for them to eat. They've had rather a bad night."

"There's kedgeree for Mr. Woodville, sir—*and* kippers."

"Kippers?" said Charles, and left his second egg unfinished. "I think I'll have a kipper."

"Very good, sir."

Higgins turned toward the hot-plates on the sideboard.

"Nobody stirring yet?"

"When I went in with Mr. Woodville's early tea he told me to go to hell," reported Higgins gently, without animus. "And I understand that Benson encountered something of the same sort when she ventured to disturb Miss Nancy, sir. But I think Mr. Woodville is in the bath now, sir."

"They were pretty well worn out," said Charles, attacking the kipper.

"It looks that way, sir." Higgins coughed his small cough. "What did you wish done with the—clothes you seem to have worn home, sir?"

"Return them to Rogers with my thanks."

"Very good, sir."

"I shan't want them again, I think."

"No, sir," agreed Higgins, who hoped not. "I notice that Mr. Woodville's car is standing outside, along with your two-seater, sir. Shall I have them both taken round to the garage?"

"Yes. How does it look? Pretty bad?"

"Mr. Woodville's car seems rather travelled, sir."

"It was a vile night, Higgins."

"It was that, sir," commiserated Higgins.

"Rogers had better tell them at the garage to have Mr. Woodville's car washed."

"Very good, sir."

Charles removed the kipper's backbone neatly.

"The rain stopped soon after we came in, I think. But we didn't care then what became of the cars—we were sick of 'em."

"I daresay they've taken no harm, sir."

"Hope not. I've put my foot in it this time, Higgins."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, sir."

"Yes, but it does give one an appetite, doesn't it?"

"They always say, 'the condemned man made a good breakfast,' sir."

Charles winced. In the normal light of a sunny morning that strange scene in the dusky room at Safferton Medway, when he, Charles Gordon, had been arrested for murder, kept trying to dwindle to the proportions of a mere bad dream. Charles Gordon was having a

kipper in his own flat in Hanover Square. And yet. . . .

"I suppose, Higgins, that very early on a sunny morning like this one, with a bad night over at last and a kipper before him, any sane man would find it hard to believe that somebody was going to take him out and hang him directly he'd finished breakfast."

"I daresay you're right, sir."

There was a sound in the little hall of the flat—a door had closed. Higgins crossed the room inquiringly.

"It's Mrs. Gordon, sir—just come in."

"Oh, God!" murmured Charles, and prepared to rise politely.

"Good morning, Higgins." He heard Cicely's clear voice in the hall.

"Good morning, madam. Mr. Gordon is just finishing breakfast."

"Here?" She came to the doorway, tweeded, blue-eyed, smiling, fresh-faced from the drive up from Kent. "Good heavens!" she said, in the doorway.

"Hello," he said. "You're up early."

"Can I get you anything, madam?"

"No, thanks."

Higgins went away.

Charles was on his feet behind the table.

"Did you drive up from the Grange?"

"Yes. It's a gorgeous morning, after the storm."

"Isn't it," said Charles, still standing.

"Oh, do go on, if you haven't finished."

"Thanks—" He resumed his seat. "Cup of tea? Bit of toast and marmalade?"

"Is the tea nice and hot?"

"Very."

"Then I will have some."

She drifted to the other side of the table and watched him rise again and pour it, with milk and one lump. She was too preoccupied to notice that the table was laid for three. He slid his own chair behind her, and fetched himself another. They sat facing one another, somehow without embarrassment, while she slowly pulled off her gloves, her eyes on the steaming tea before her.

Charles began on toast and marmalade.

"So this is Edinburgh," she murmured then.

"Edinburgh?" (Oh, yes, once he had been going to Edinburgh. Since then, he had gone to Paris, as sounding more inaccessible.) "I meant to go—but something came up."

"You're not going after all?"

"Doubt it, now. When are you off for Switzerland?"

She lifted her cup deliberately and drank. She was in for it now. If only she had gone to the dressmaker's first—if only she had not stepped off in Hanover Square at all, for any such frippery as that little jade pendant she was fond of and had missed on the cruise—or if Charles were not Charles, smiling at one so trustfully over his toast and marmalade, and making one feel a dog and a sneak—. But here he was, where he had a perfect right to be.

"Charles. I want to talk to you seriously."

"At breakfast?" he objected, not at all seriously.

It had just occurred to him shatteringly that Nancy was occupying Cicely's room for no earthly reason that Cicely could find for herself, and that if Nancy came to breakfast or if Mortimer arrived inopportunely with news from Safferton Medway, only a miracle could preserve secrecy concerning a chauffeur named Gerrard, in the face of Cicely's legitimate curiosity. Also, he was aware that Cicely didn't know he knew she didn't mean to come back from Switzerland. And if Johnny came to breakfast now, it would give that away, too.

Tight corners in politics were the breath of life to him—a political situation of this deli-

cacy would have been child's play to him. He would have made speeches and pressed bells and placed chairs, and possibly kissed hands, and nobody would have been any the wiser. But a private domestic *impasse* floored him. He wanted to give up and giggle.

Her profile, as she sat looking down at the cup, held his eyes with its fine, brooding beauty. One never tired of looking at her.

"Charles. Don't laugh. I've fallen terribly in love."

"I know."

"It's—worse than that. I'm going to leave you, Charles."

"I know. I've seen Johnny." It was no good saying anything else now.

She looked up, startled.

"Is he here?"

"In his room."

She sighed.

"I'd better clear out, then. He's—disowned me."

"It was pretty hard on him. You see, I had to own up to the rest of it. I had to say that there wasn't much in it—for either of us. Johnny's doll is dripping sawdust."

"Charles, I've been very good, haven't I—for a very long time," she pleaded, suddenly.

"Very careful of your man's honor and your Parliamentary reputation. I've adorned your house and your name for—fourteen years. I've been discreet and—fairly amiable, haven't I?" She paused, a little out of breath, her eyes on his face.

Charles was not looking at her, and he said nothing. It was going to be even worse than he had feared. But she was doing a courageous thing, to face him with it. . . .

"I've done the best I could, with you," she went on, then, "because there wasn't really anything that mattered more. But that's over now. There's something now that I want more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, and I've got to have it. I've been very comfortable with you, and you're a—very polite person to live with. One could hardly be downright unhappy at the Grange. I might have gone on like that till the end of time, drifting pleasantly toward a respectable grave. But I've just discovered that I'm not dead yet. And I've made up my mind to live before I die.—Charles, I didn't expect you to care, but I do think you might keep your mind on it till I've finished!"

"I'm listening," he insisted, out of a mental mist. (She must not suspect anything about

Nancy now, he decided. That would hurt her pride. Let her believe she was the sole deserter, for she had no conscience to speak of, and thus she would think of him always with a pleasant compunction.—For a man who knew nothing about women, he sometimes did very well.)

"I'm going away with somebody else. I want a divorce. I suppose that will hurt your career, won't it." (Perhaps that would reach him. Was he so sure of her, so habituated to acquiescence, that he could not grasp that it had come to an end? She was burning her bridges, and for all the sign he made it might have been just any November bonfire.)

"My what? Oh, career. I don't know that I care much about that." (Let it wash over him. That was the thing to do now. Don't go barging into things with explanations of his own. Let her do the talking, and she would have them both out of this yet, and quite painlessly.) "After all, one does retire sometime," he added.

"You will retire—at once?"

"Oh, yes."

"You mean a scandal now would do you out of a Ministry?"

"Probably."

"Shall you mind an awful lot?"

"Not an awful lot."

She looked at him speculatively. He was taking it much too well. She was not quite sure what she expected, but this wasn't it.

"Charles, what's happened to you? There was a time when a possible Ministry would have meant the world to you."

"Don't know." He rose from the table and began to prowl aimlessly, feeling his way through this precarious conversation. If his own conscience had been as clear as heretofore the hidden hysterical element would have been lacking from the scene. He had dealt with some such matters before, preserving his own equilibrium—and hers. But now, precariously balanced himself on the tight-rope of conjugal tact, he felt a vertigo. "Fed up," he threw over his shoulder, sparing of words.

"Well!" she gasped. "Does Mortimer know that?"

"It hasn't happened to come up."

"But it will, won't it—any minute?"

"I suppose so."

"Yet you don't try to stop me." Plainly it puzzled her.

"Oh, no."

"Then my—divorce may not have any real effect."

"Enough for Mortimer, I think."

"He'll drop you?"

"Politically, he'll have to."

"What an old-fashioned idea it is!" she cried resentfully.

"Fortunately, it's rather an old-fashioned Government—especially with Mortimer at its head."

Her candid gaze was a little rueful. One was fond of Charles, one did not want to hurt him, but it was hard to tell what went on inside his head.

Almost any other man would have made a scene of some kind, as he was entitled to do. It was Charles' fairness, his happy lack of hysteria, that had given her the impulse and the courage to tell him what she meant to do. And yet—she wasn't quite satisfied. . . .

"I've got to go, Charles," she said apologetically.

"As you please, my dear."

"It's—rather a queer feeling you give me. I suppose I'd nerved myself for a scene."

"My dear girl, scenes are as obsolete as duels!"

"You think so?" She gave him a wise side-

long look. (Funny Charles, he did live with his head in a hole!) "Not that I expected you to mind my going," she explained wryly, "except for its effect on your own impeccability. But somehow I didn't expect you to take it quite like this. You can't be well, Charles. Or else—" A new thought struck her. Not altogether new. Richard Neville had had it first. With anyone but Charles in question. . . .

"I'm perfectly well, thanks very much," he interposed hastily. "As a matter of fact, I've been thinking for some time that I'd had about enough. So just you go along and be happy if you can."

"Is that all?" she asked faintly, with an expression as near to amazement as her habitual composure would compass.

"Do you want my blessing, or what?" he grinned, and passed a hand across his hair.

"If I didn't know you so well," she began slowly, watching him, "I'd say you'd already been thinking of leaving me."

"And that would hurt your feelings terribly, wouldn't it," he suggested, for he really wanted to know. (A near thing altogether. Suppose he had spoken first. . . .)

"Yes, I should mind that, rather," she admitted frankly. "Silly of me, isn't it!"

"Then I wasn't," he assured her promptly, and she was wholly taken in by that congenitally ingenuous smile of his, and by his reputation.

"The impeccable Charles," she derided him softly, but with a certain satisfaction.

"Nobody would have believed it, if I had been—not even you," he threw back, emboldened to Machiavellian measures. "The fable of our mutual devotion has become so much an established tradition it's a wonder we haven't come to believe in it ourselves!"

"We *have* been clever, Charles," she remarked, amused. "Though it's been rather a strain sometimes, hasn't it!"

"Not too much of a strain for me, with as decorative a person as you are, Cicely," he objected, obedient to his native gallantry.

"I always *said* you had beautiful manners! We could never have brought it off without them! Or perhaps I should say, your manner. You could behave devotedly to a gate-post!"

"Oh, here, I say—!" he said, not quite liking it.

She sobered.

"Charles, I'm going to make a mess of things. I hope you won't mind—too much."

"It's young Neville, I suppose?"

"Yes. Younger than I am. That's bad, isn't it."

"I daresay he'll never notice. You're very lovely, Cicely," he reminded her with all sincerity.

"Thank you, Charles! And he hasn't much money."

"I suppose you'd like me to—do what I can about that."

"Thank you, Charles," she smiled. (Odd, how she had never appreciated this man! A blind spot. She wondered again with already a pleasant compunction what would become of him, and wished, a little to her own surprise, that she could keep an eye on him, even after—) "Charles, you *are* rather priceless. To think I've almost hated you sometimes! Do you know why?"

"I can't think," he murmured.

"Because nobody else would!"

They laughed together this time. They could always do that. It was one of the things that had made those fourteen lean years possible.

"You're so damned charming, Charles, I could kill you!" she confessed with real affection.

"Sorry. Has this Neville got a nasty disposition, or something?"

"No—that's not quite what I mean. But he's been kicked about a lot—gone hungry, even—been lonely and friendless and forlorn and ill——"

"Then the real trouble with me was that I was too healthy and not sufficiently friendless!"

"I'm not blaming you, Charles. God knows, nobody ever blames you for anything! And I don't suppose you can really prevent the very housemaids from cherishing a hopeless passion for you——"

"Oh, come, now, Cicely—" he began in real embarrassment, so that she went straight on, enjoying it.

"—and I must say, you behave very well in the circumstances——"

"You grant me that?"

"Yes, damn you, yes! You don't even take advantage of the Prime Minister's infatuation for you! Mortimer would let this pass, since it's you—if you'd handle him right." She rose, long and cool and dainty, in her well-cut tweeds. "I hate to spoil it all, but I've got to—for the sake of a man who's never had any-

thing. There's a sort of justice about that, isn't there."

"More than you think, perhaps," he ruminated, thinking of Nancy, who had had very little herself except trouble.

"I wonder what you mean by that!" She paused, while a faint suspicion fluttered again in her mind and was downed because she didn't want to believe it.

"Nothing," he said, with that smile.

"You know, Charles, I haven't liked you so well in years!"

"Don't weaken, Cicely!"

"No. I'm going to be terribly happy."

"I'm glad of that, my dear, it's time, isn't it?"

"High time."

"Have you been thoroughly wretched with me, then?"

"I keep telling you, no. Just empty."

"I'm sorry."

He had always been sorry, but he realized vividly now how much she had missed of the sort of devotion he was unable to bestow on her. He had been as kind as he could, as though that meant anything, and as thoughtful. They had not got on one another's nerves. But Cicely, with her beauty and her charming

ways, had deserved love. He hoped this Neville appreciated what a dear she really was. He hoped he would be kind to her too, along with—all the rest of it. He was aware of a vague wish to keep an eye on her, even after——

"You know, if I don't get away soon, it will begin to work on me too!" She stood smiling at him, her head a little on one side. "And I've always taken a certain pride in being the only one who could resist you. After all, who but you would have taken it quite like this!" she marvelled.

"Well, it would be rather silly my getting the wind up now, wouldn't it! I believe you're disappointed that I don't threaten to shoot him!"

"There was one time when you weren't so—obliging."

"Oh, that," he said, remembering. "No—I couldn't stick that." (A madman from the French Embassy—fellow with a beard—thorough rotter, apparently—he had barged in on that, rather. Good job, too. He had returned unexpectedly from the House one afternoon and found the too familiar silk hat and yellow gloves on the little table in the hall of the flat. The fellow was in the drawing-

room alone, Cicely having not yet appeared—she always kept them waiting, though she could be prompt enough for himself, who was not worth an effect, probably. He had walked casually into the drawing-room and spoken a few well-chosen words, studiously clear of open insult—the fellow had turned greenish and left in a hurry. Cicely called it interfering.) "You couldn't have gone on with that, it was up to me to stop you making an eternal ass of yourself."

"Was that why?" she murmured. "I thought it was the election coming on."

He was wondering why she had come, and if she would ever go. Presumably she would want something from her own room—where Nancy was still asleep. Or Nancy might come in for breakfast any minute——

"You're not sorry now that I stopped it, are you?"

"I wasn't sorry then," she confessed unexpectedly, with her disarming candour. "I was wondering how to get rid of him, but I hated your interfering. But believe it or not, Charles, nothing you could have said this time would have mattered." She glanced at her watch. "I'm late—I only stepped off here for

a pendant, on my way to the dressmaker's——"

At this point the Prime Minister entered the room.

## II

CHARLES saw him come, with a sinking feeling. They would be properly in for it now, if Mortimer caught on, or if Cicely discovered the reason of his visit. Had he anything to tell? Would he, in his wisdom, wait till Cicely had left the room—to find Nancy in her bed? And *what* would he have to tell?

There was a lot of music to be faced, one way and another, and Charles, hearing the first distant clash of cymbals, slid into abysmal funk. Early morning optimism evaporated. Mortimer, expressing himself about Cicely and the courier; Cicely, expressing herself about the chauffeur; it would pretty well flatten out the whole day.

Well, they had fooled Mortimer for fourteen years, they might be able to get through the next few minutes. The thing was to look as though one had a clear conscience. Cicely was born looking that way, anyhow. Charles' expression became elaborately Parliamenta-

rian. He looked about to make a speech. If Mortimer had not been so surprised and pleased at seeing Cicely there, he must have perceived at once that something more than murder rested heavily on Charles' chest.

"Hello!" he said, and held out both his hands to her. And then it occurred to him that perhaps Charles hadn't told her quite all the story—perhaps not any of it—and where were the other two?—and why was she here, with her hat on, at this time of the morning—? His diplomatic sixth sense registered reservations in the air. He became Prime Minister. "How nice you look!"

"Hello, darling," said Cicely, and gave him her cheek. "You're out early."

"It's my day to visit that worthless brother of mine at Bushey Park," he explained at once. "Poor man, he's got an ugly wife. I just stepped off here in the hope of catching Charles," he added casually, rolling a guarded eye in that direction. "I——"

"Politics!" said Cicely, and made a face. "I'm off to the dressmaker's."

The Prime Minister decided that Charles had told her nothing at all. That was a bit of cheek! One of the other two was bound to give it away sometime.

"Don't go," said Mortimer, still holding her hand. "I only came to say, Charles, that we've got the man we want."

A look passed between them.

"Oh," said Charles. "That's good."

"Yes, it's a great relief," said Mortimer. "And since I find you both together like this, there's a—a bit of news that might as well come now."

"Darling, I must run along this minute," begged Cicely uncomfortably. "I've got a fitting."

"The fact is," said the Prime Minister, without reference to fittings, "I'm coming to the conclusion, Cicely, that we may with perseverance and luck, make something of Charles after all."

"That's very optimistic of you, darling," she fenced, with an eye toward the door.

"Suppose we give him another chance, eh, Cicely?"

"What sort of chance?"

They both began to watch him with a horrified fascination. His words came hideously pat just now. Another chance. They saw that he undoubtedly had something up his sleeve. And they both suspected, however reluctantly, what it would be.

"Of course he's young yet, but he'll learn," Mortimer went on, enjoying his effect quite innocently. "I think you and I together may be able to pull him through the next ten years in such a way that he'll be a credit to us—God and Labour willing!"

"Are you—driving at anything in particular, sir?"

Charles put the question nervously, with the eternal human instinct to discredit or postpone the unwelcome inevitable. His eyes were watchful, as though he did not know very well what was coming.

"You will recollect," said Mortimer, "that I have had poor old Stephenson's resignation for some time now."

"Quite."

"He's a very sick man, poor chap. It follows that somebody's got to have his seat in the Cabinet."

"Quite."

The Prime Minister looked from one to the other. His next words were a little impressive.

"Charles, I'm offering you the Colonial Office."

There was a silence.

Charles stood quietly at some distance from

them, looking at nothing. He and Cicely were in for it now. What a day!

At last he turned to her, as a man must turn in a crisis to a fourteen years' wife, no matter how things stand between them. Their eyes met squarely, across the room.

"Funny, isn't it," he said, very low.

"Charles——!"

She checked a desperate protest. Cicely was a sportsman. But it wasn't fair, it was most wilfully unfair of something somewhere, to raise this particular question at just this moment, when things had just settled themselves so nicely.

"What's the matter?" Mortimer looked from one to the other, dimly apprehensive. "You must have been expecting it."

Charles had taken a few paces away from them, slowly. Both ways his hands were tied, by his own inclinations and by Cicely's stifled plea. But still it was a thing he had wanted all his life that he must now renounce. And it was Mortimer who must be answered. Mortimer, making a characteristically graceful gesture on the heels of the past night's escapade.

"I can only try to thank you, sir—more for

your confidence in me than for the honor you offer me—but——"

"Bless my soul, he's going to make us a speech!" said Mortimer. "He'll start hinting for a peerage in his peroration. What else?"

"I hope you will forgive me, sir," Charles continued, as though no one had spoken. "I can't accept."

"Charles!" breathed Cicely, a hand at her throat. (It *was* decent of him! Did he mind, really? If only one could be sure——)

Mortimer stood turning it over in his mind.

"There's a long story here somewhere," he decided at last. "You may as well begin it now."

"Not very long," Cicely contradicted with a sweet defiance. "I've just told Charles I'm going to leave him."

It was out.

They waited, linked by their mutual guilt, for the deluge. But it fell rather flat.

"Oh, nonsense," objected Mortimer mildly. "What have you two been quarrelling about?"

"We haven't!" Cicely denied in a sort of desperation. (Let's get it over—let's get away to the dressmaker's—to Dover—to Richard in Geneva——)

"Haven't quarrelled?" repeated Mortimer,

elaborately incredulous, as to very small children who pitch a large tale. "Then what on earth is it all about?"

"I've fallen in love with somebody else," announced Cicely, so starkly that it got home.

"Charles!" Mortimer spun round on him. "For heaven's sake—are you letting her make a fool of herself?"

"Am I?" Charles inquired of Cicely.

"Charles understands," she said sulkily.

"Oh, does he! Well, I don't! And while it's none of my damned business, and mind you I've said that first, I'm not going to stand by and watch you wreck one of the happiest marriages I can point to! What have you been up to, Cicely? Out with it!"

"Oh, I can't stand any more of this 'happy marriage' nonsense!" she cried, feeling childish and wretched and very much in the wrong, for she had been all through this once with Johnny. "Charles, tell him the rest of it!"

"Don't hide behind Charles, my girl, I'll attend to him later. Come, now. Who's this blighter you've fallen in love with? Anyone I know?"

"No. Anyway, that's got nothing to do with it."

"On the contrary, the identity of the man

you suddenly prefer to Charles does appear to have some slight bearing on the matter," Mortimer stated didactically.

" 'Charles'—'Charles'—always 'Charles!' " cried poor Cicely, clenching her hands. "Of course you'd be on his side! Everyone will be on his side! *Poor old Charles, his wife has left him!* Well, I don't mind that! I don't mind taking all the blame! It's rather funny, isn't it, that Charles himself seems to be the only one who knows or cares about my side of it! But he's said I'd better go, and I'm going!"

"Just one minute!" Mortimer barred her exit with a wrist of iron and swung her round to face his righteous wrath. "Don't you realize what this will mean to him?"

"Less than you think, perhaps!" she threw at him, her head well back.

"You'd wreck his career at this point—" Mortimer was beginning sternly, but she jerked away from him and held her ground, midway between them.

"Hang his career! He doesn't care about that any more anyway! Ask him!"

"You'd knock Charles to bits *now,* and spoil my Cabinet," the Prime Minister continued implacably, "for the sake of some crazy infatuation?"

"It's *not* an infatuation!" she refuted furiously. "It means more to me than anything you've got to offer can possibly mean to Charles! This is flesh and blood, not politics! And I won't give it up! No, not for you nor Charles, nor the Cabinet, nor all of you put together!"

*"Cicely—!"* thundered the Prime Minister, but Charles' most dulcet voice made itself heard in the gathering storm.

"I don't think you quite understand, sir——"

"I'm coming to you later." Mortimer waved him aside. "Cicely first."

"But I think I could explain——"

"Sit down!" barked Mortimer at his Downing Street best, and Charles perched on the edge of the nearest table in martyred submission.

There was really no holding Mortimer now, he perceived. Mortimer was off. Well, Cicely had asked for it, blurting out like that that she had fallen in love with somebody. She knew what she was about, though. If anybody could stand up to Mortimer, she could. This would be a battle worth watching. And her arguments, following closely the lines of his own to Nancy a few days ago,

seemed to him sound. *It means more to me than anything you've got to offer can possibly mean to Charles.* Very sound.

"Now, then." Mortimer addressed himself exclusively to Cicely, who certainly did not quail. "First of all, who is this fellow?"

"Well, it's a man I met on the boat," she made sullen and partial confession.

"My God!" said Mortimer, aghast, and Charles, who had been waiting for something like this, was able to see that it was, after all, inherently funny.

Mortimer turned on him.

"I said so, Charles! I said this was bound to come of your damned casual ways!" He pointed an awful finger at Cicely, resuming the prosecution. "What does he do, this fellow? Anything?"

"He—travels."

"Just a loafer, eh? Got money?"

"N—no. But—they've promised him a better job."

"What sort of job? Who promised him?"

"In the London office. The steamship company."

"You don't mean you fell in love with the captain?" demanded Mortimer, reducing the thing, as he thought, to absurdity.

"No. He was the courier."

*"The what?"*

Cicely sighed.

"Don't shout," she said, and Charles, who could bear no more, tactlessly snickered.

Mortimer was tramping up and down.

"Two months on a boat and fifteen years of happiness goes overboard!" he stormed. "I never heard of such nonsense! I——"

"Fourteen," corrected Charles from the table, and met Mortimer's withering grey glance with a shameless grin.

"Happiness!" Cicely stamped her foot.

"Well, but you have been happy with Charles, haven't you!" Mortimer voiced his supreme argument.

"No!" cried Cicely.

"No," corroborated Charles, perching still.

"Really, Cicely—really, Charles—you'll be telling me next that your whole marriage was a fake!"

"Well, there you are, sir!" Charles spread his eloquent hands.

"But this is preposterous," said Mortimer heavily. "Have you two gone crazy, or have I?"

"Well, after all, we ought to know, oughtn't we!" suggested Cicely. "And I say that our

marriage *was* a fake and a farce and had been for as long as I can remember!"

"Then why——"

"Various reasons! His career, chiefly, that you talk so much about! And there was nothing either of us wanted any more than what we had. That's over now. There is something I want so badly that nothing can stop me from having it. I'm in love, I tell you, for the first time in my life! *In love*—does either of you know what that means? I never felt like this before! Charles never felt like this about me! And you've got the cheek, James Mortimer, to expect me to stay here and atrophy so that Charles can be Colonial Secretary! Why, I'd never give this up—*never in this world!*"

Mortimer, apparently swamped, turned with a questioning look to Charles on the table, and Charles answered with a brief shake of his head, denoting humorous helplessness. Mortimer had elected to deal with Cicely first. Very well, let him. Moreover, for a man who knew nothing about women, Charles was seeing very clearly.

He saw that this was a different Cicely from the cool, gracious beauty he had lived with for fourteen years. This Cicely was capable of

losing her temper, her head, even, and rather enjoyed doing so. An instinct, older and wiser than Charles, a sum of experience dating back to Adam, warned him not to spoil her scene.

Let her fight it out, brazenly, pitifully, charmingly—it would make her victory all the more precious. Don't take from her one smallest part of her stature in the drama. She was that most theatrical of creatures—a knowing woman deeply in love. It was Cicely's day. Don't spoil it. This battle with Mortimer was what she had unconsciously expected from him, her husband. A scene. He had disappointed her. Let Mortimer play it through.

And please God Nancy would sleep soundly.

Charles was troubled at the same time by an unavoidable self-accusation of slacking. He could not but feel a cad to let Cicely face the music alone like this, when half the guilt was rightly his. He had no moral grounds for posing as the martyred husband of the piece. And yet to confess his own share would be doubly tactless now.

Altogether, Charles found his position a peculiarly awkward one. He was getting sympathy he did not deserve, gratitude he had not

earned. And yet in the end, the gallant thing was surely to keep still. It did make one feel an ass, though. Perhaps that was the ultimate forfeit exacted for freedom—the unreasonable condemnation of one's own ruthless soul, instead of the justice tempered with mercy administered by one's prejudiced friends.

At least she had forgotten whatever it was she came to collect, and Nancy might be safe.

He sat there on the edge of the table, swinging his foot, looking M.P. and at his ease, but feeling somehow ashamed of himself, and with a nervous eye on the door.

## III

"I AM amazed, Cicely, that you can be so heartless," Mortimer was saying, more in sorrow than in anger. "Your attitude is the most abominably selfish thing I have ever listened to. You must have some feeling for Charles——"

"I like Charles," Cicely maintained doggedly, "but I'm not sentimental about him."

"You actually wish me to believe that it's all a myth about you two?" Mortimer felt himself clutching at straws.

"Yes, we shall soon be an exploded theory," remarked Charles from the table, but his eyes as they met Mortimer's were not as flippant as his words. First and last, this was hard on old Mortimer.

"But, Cicely—" Mortimer rallied suddenly, the persuasive Parliamentarian uppermost. "Even if this preposterous thing is true—you can't wreck him now, just when I am able without indecent haste to put him where he

wants to be—where he can begin to be useful."

"Useful? Charles doesn't know anything about the Colonies!"

"He doesn't have to," Mortimer assured her patiently, with an inner wonder and despair that they were actually allowed to vote.

"So that's your precious Government!" scoffed Cicely.

"My dear Cicely—" (Ah, what was the use? What was the good of trying to talk to even the prettiest of them as though they had minds? You couldn't argue with them, and you couldn't trust them. You gave them an inch, you put yourself ever so little in their power, and what was the result? Look at Charles. Done for. Unless he was saved by a miracle, in spite of himself, she had done for him. Charles, the beloved disciple, the priceless product of his own long experience, the nearest thing he had to a son—Charles, to be done in now by this blonde baggage who thought that Colonial Secretaries—) "My dear Cicely—this is not the time for me to expound to you the nature and nuances of Government. Charles has earned a seat in the Cabinet. It is in my power at last to give it him. And Charles is a trained, esteemed statesman of the first water. We'll let it go

at that, for the present. The point I wish to make, my dear, is that I'm not going to stand by and see him cheated of it at the last minute by a whim of his wife's!"

"Whim!" echoed Cicely, furious again, and then wilted, to cast an appealing glance at Charles. It had not taken her fourteen years to learn that if you looked at Charles like that he would always back you up.

"No, really, sir, I must protest." Charles to the rescue from the table. (Mortimer was wearing her out. He could still outlast any debate, any committee, any woman that lived, old Mortimer, bless his soul!) "You've got to let her off this, you have, really."

"You keep still," commanded Mortimer crushingly.

"I have kept still, but I can't let you chivvy Cicely any longer, sir. She's been a brick, and I've had my day, and I don't really care much about going on with it forever."

"Had your day! My dear boy, that's much the most insane thing I've heard yet! Your speech last month showed what you can do!"

"Swan song," said Charles, swinging his foot. "I've been thinking of giving up politics—I have been, really." (But not when he made that speech, he knew well enough. Not,

as a matter of fact, before that morning at the Grange. This was the first of many such discretions.)

"You're lying," said Mortimer promptly.

"You flatter me," smiled Charles, swinging his foot.

"I really believe he has been thinking of something of the sort," Cicely put in. "He's taken the whole thing very calmly."

"Charles never makes a noise, even in the House," boasted Mortimer. "Anybody can make a noise. What's up, Charles? Aren't you well?"

"Oh, yes, thanks very much, I'm perfectly well." (He foresaw that he would get very tired of that question during the next few months. After all, couldn't a man change his mind?)

"Then what's at the bottom of all this rubbish about retiring?"

Charles stole a glance at Cicely, whose feelings would be hurt if she guessed that he had thought of leaving her on his own account—Cicely, whose day this was to be. You didn't hurt the Cicely's of this world needlessly, even though you lied to its Mortimer's. Cicely was spoilt. And besides, everyone lied to the Prime Minister. Charles' turn, at last.

"Fed up," he sighed, for the second time that morning.

"There, you see?" crowed Cicely.

To Mortimer it was sheer Quixotism. He knew that no man in his right mind would seriously entertain the idea of Charles fed up with anything. Half the value to him of the younger man lay in Charles' slim keenness, his zest for whatever came. He was splendidly unjaded. *Fed up!*

"Like hell!" said the Prime Minister unexpectedly.

It was a remark which he reserved for special occasions, and it was weighted almost to inaudibility with the accumulated spleen of an acquisitive lifetime. The last time he had been heard to make use of it was in connection with President Wilson at the end of the war. Charles, who had been present then too, started. As bad as that?

"I'm sorry, sir."

His eyes wavered from the straight grey gaze which cut into him. He swung his foot defensively, while Cicely watched them, silent, like a diplomatic child whose small fate hangs in the balance.

"His Majesty's Secretary of State for the

Colonies," said Mortimer sonorously in the quiet room.

"It sounds beautiful," Charles agreed, with a wistful smile.

"Charles, you're deserting me. I counted on you."

"No, I'm not, sir, really I'm not, that is, I—" This was what he had dreaded. It jerked him off the table and left him standing in the middle of the carpet, caught again between his two millstones. "I can't tell you what it would have meant to me to work with you—like that—" His voice drifted away lamely. No good. No good talking now.

"Well, Cicely, you heard him?" said Mortimer, triumphant. "He meant that. What are you going to do about it?"

"But he doesn't want the beastly Ministry as much as I want to go—do you, Charles?" she pleaded a little unfairly, wild to be let off, knowing herself a traitor, but driven by her obstinate desire.

Charles' eyes went to her unseeingly. Dilemma. Cicely or Mortimer. She was spoilt, and very charming. But Mortimer was—old. He was deserting Mortimer.

The dreadful bitterness, the dispassionate irony, the aging resignation of that *"Like*

*hell!"* weighed on his soul. Mortimer had been counting on him for a long time. It was common sense, it was force of habit, the course of least resistance, life itself, to stick to Mortimer now, and let everything else go hang. The thing he had worked toward for twenty years was coming under his hand today—a chance at a vast, vexed field of action, an opening for a real policy, opportunity to back up Mortimer where it would do some good. . . .

His heart cramped painfully—Nancy. *I adore you, I have done ever since I was a baby.* There was no replacing a thing like that. The thing he had gone hungry for during the same twenty years, filling in with the rest of it—the thing he had never known and almost never dreamed of—the incredible, dazzling thing she had placed in his hands. A love like that—would one ever know what to do with it? And then—*the best man wins—and that's Mr. Mortimer.* She saw exactly how it was. Nancy was not spoilt, nor old, nor counting on him that way. Nancy was just there, in the same world, loving him but not expecting anything—*Who's happy anyway?*

Well, Cicely might be. And—dizzy prospect—even Nancy might be. Without count-

ing himself. It was only Mortimer—the best man of them all—who stood to lose. Mortimer, and the Cabinet, and the heedless, needy nation, if he counted for anything in its tangled affairs. *This is flesh and blood, not politics.* Three people—four, counting the courier—against Mortimer and the nation. With the ache of a long loyalty feeling the wrench of change, he wanted to stick to Mortimer. But could anything outweigh in the end this fateful late flowering of his and Cicely's. . . .

"No," he said against his will, to Cicely's question. "No, I don't want it—like that."

"You see?" she crowed again to Mortimer. "He understands."

"Charles, this is making an old man of me."

"I'm terribly sorry, sir."

"Don't go on saying that!" snapped Mortimer. "You'll be a damn' sight sorrier, before you die! You're too young to retire. You'll find even racing dull, after the House. I tried it once, because they said I had a weak heart, and I know! I'm back in the game now—heart or no heart!"

"Heart!" laughed Cicely, gay again, for she was getting her own way, as usual. (God was always on Cicely's side!) "You haven't got one!"

Mortimer took no notice of her. Ruinous to his Cabinet, faithless to Charles, she was already erased from his consciousness. He walked out from under her wheedling hand without a glance—walked away down the room, his shoulders a little bent.

"And now you may go—to the dressmaker's," he said heavily, and Charles made an instinctive gesture against the terrible lifelessness of those few words. Mortimer was beaten. For once in his quarrelsome, obstinate life, Mortimer had lost.

Just then Johnny came in, tubbed and shaved and hungry, wondering what the night had brought forth at Safferton Medway.

His honest blue eyes widened at the three of them. His mind whipped back to Nancy, with a prayer that she was still asleep. Had Cicely found out? What had Mortimer come to tell them? If Nancy remained out of sight, need Cicely know about Gerrard? She had no right to know now.

"Good morning, sir," he said to Mortimer. "Morning, Charles." And to Cicely, coolly, as he passed her without the kiss he had bestowed every morning of his life which found them together, "Hello."

Cicely flinched and wavered. First Morti-

mer—then Johnny. *Everyone will be on Charles' side.* She was beginning to see what that would mean. Her instinctive glance at Charles was full of the hurt reproach of an unjustly punished child. Poor, spoilt Cicely, who had never been cut in her conquering life. Charles' eyes were kind. He understood, and seemed to say that Johnny was a young beast. Her own gaze blurred, under his sympathy. She caught her breath, as against an icy blast, and turned away.

"I'm late for the beastly fitting," she said. And without looking back—"Good-bye, Charles."

"God bless," said Charles gently, and watched her go.

A door closed.

"Kedge," said Johnny brightly, simulating appetite at the sideboard. "Kedge or kippers—I think kedge." He helped himself liberally and returned to the table. "Any news?"

"Oh, yes," said Charles, who had almost forgotten that part of it. "They've got him, you said, sir?"

"What?" said Mortimer, turning—he, too, had dismissed the murder from his mind long ago. "Oh, that. Yes, they've got him, and

your friend Mrs. Martin has been driven to the nearest station to catch a train to London."

"How did they get him?" queried Johnny interestedly.

"Man from Scotland Yard found him crawling along the road toward the railway station——"

"Crawling?"

"Yes, he was in bad shape—smashed a kneecap or something like that when he made his escape. Then he'd been soaked through for hours and was none too healthy a specimen to start with——"

Nancy's head showed cautiously round the door.

"Didn't I hear Cicely's voice?"

"She's gone," said Charles briefly.

"Hooray, they've got him!" Johnny greeted her, waving a fork as he rose. "Come have some breakfast."

"They've got the murderer?" she demanded.

Charles nodded, and some of the relief faded quickly from her face. She had not had a bad night, for her healthy young system demanded sleep. But the hour since her waking had been a sort of nightmare in itself.

"Will they hang him?"

"No," said Mortimer. "He's dead. He died early this morning without making a confession or accounting for himself in any way."

"But then——"

"He was identified by the maid at the inn, so Charles is quite clear of the thing."

"And Mrs. Martin?"

"On her way up to Town, by now."

"Then they're both—dead," said Nancy slowly. Her eyes went to Charles. "Then we'll never know—who they were—or what it was he hadn't told——"

"I don't think I want to," said Charles doubtfully. "Somehow I can't feel that it's any of our damned business."

"It would have been," said Mortimer grimly, "if this fellow had got away!"

"They've still got the car," said Johnny practically. "They can trace it, I suppose. They'll have to, in order to get the names to put on the tombstones," he concluded cheerfully.

## IV

"I WONDER," said Nancy, eery-eyed, "what it was he hadn't told."

"Better have some breakfast," suggested Charles.

"I had mine in bed, thanks," she smiled. It was a luxury which she adored.

"Good. Then you'd better have a walk."

"Come along," said Johnny briskly. "Three times round the square for you—bit of an airing. Where's your hat?"

"You'd better find Mrs. Martin," advised Charles, "and tell her you're all right. Johnny will go with you."

"I suppose she'll be at the hotel." Nancy started a little reluctantly for the door.

"And, mind you, come back here for luncheon," he added.

"Thanks, I will."

They looked at one another wistfully, longing for a moment alone.

"Give her my love," said Charles, and she

laughed, and went, Johnny doggishly at her heels.

Charles turned to find the Prime Minister eyeing him speculatively. Accusation was not there, nor reproach. But Mortimer seemed to be wondering. (God, what a son to have been begotten by a man who could not contrive to live long enough to know him! Charles' father had died of a chill, and for this Mortimer, who was a hardy old gentleman, never forgave him.) But behind the habitual pride and affection in Mortimer's gaze lay a certain uncertainty. . . .

"You're in love yourself," observed Mortimer suddenly.

"Well, yes," said Charles without shame, "there's that too."

"It's that Nancy girl. I might have known it."

They looked at one another in whimsical silence.

*"Pax,"* said Charles. "I've done what I could. I meant to stick it out, sir, honestly I did," he added with embarrassed directness.

The Prime Minister grunted non-committally.

"Yes, you see, sir, as a matter of fact, if I had never met Richard Neville I might have—

well, I should probably have told Cicely not to be a fool and tried to carry on. Nancy—meant me to. But the fact is, I feel as though I knew him rather well. And Cicely's not being a fool. I can't help it that he's a better man than I am."

"Gunga Din," muttered Mortimer.

"I *beg* your pardon, sir!" protested Charles, a little flushed with oratory, and earnestness, and a guilty, secret joy.

He had done his loyal best for Mortimer. He had honestly meant to keep his life in the same dull, circumspect track it had trodden for years, at the cost of his own desire, and Nancy's, and Cicely's. He had meant to be a martyr, and fate had been against him. And now he was free. But he wished that Mortimer could be made to realize just how good his intentions had been.

To Mortimer those few embarrassed words of Charles' had been inexpressible comfort. He had not been wantonly deserted, he saw. With the penetration of his long affection, he was able to appreciate the battleground Charles' honest soul must have been. *I meant to stick it out.* That was balm. That was Charles.

Seldom had a man less personal conceit than

Charles, and so he went on to point out to the Prime Minister on Cicely's behalf what a dull dog he was himself——

("Rubbish!" said Mortimer rudely.)

—with his nose always to the political grindstone, and his lighter moments devoted to delphiniums and golf; and how he never cared for cruises, whereas young Richard had already been clean round the world. What on earth, he demanded a little more theatrically than was his habit, could a woman find in him to amuse her?—Nancy's queer convictions obtruded here, and he plunged on into further footless encomiums on the courier, who was young, he said, repeating himself occasionally, and gay, but must have gone a little hungry and more than a little sad, in his few years.

"You mean to say you *like* the fellow?" insisted the Prime Minister incredulously.

"Oh, yes."

Charles' mind went back to that brief acquaintance with Richard Neville at the Grange, on a morning which seemed an æon or so ago, when each had known as he went his way that they might have been friends.

Something of all that Charles endeavored now to convey to the Prime Minister. How the boy's straight grey gaze had tried not to

linger on her beauty, and almost succeeded; how he had noticed Richard's hands as they lighted a cigarette, and what sensitive, fine hands they were, to hold a woman's heart; how Cicely was lovely with a new radiance, and how right it was, how obvious, how inevitable, in fact, that she should choose as she had done between them.

("Rot!" said Mortimer tersely.)

But no great man looks back for long, and his ruthless mind had already leaped ahead to Charles' future, whatever remained of it. Yes, he had a new game to play now—the girl was honest and loyal and good to look at, and she loved him. She would look after him better than Cicely ever had done—no gallivanting off alone, probably—no need, ever, to make excuses for her, to close one's eyes to small signs one refused to believe in, as with Cicely. The girl was his, and no bones about it. Something in that. But on the other hand——

"Charles, is anything worth giving up a man's job for?"

"Once that question would have worried me. As it is, I'm not giving up my job, it's deserting me. For a time, anyway, till all this blows over."

"For all my time," said Mortimer sadly,

and Charles could not answer that. "This business of Cicely's might still be avoided, you know—if you handled it right."

"To tell the truth, sir, I'm a little tired of handling things right."

Mortimer sighed.

"We all are," he said gently.

"I want Cicely to go away and be happy, as I'm convinced she can be, and leave me to do the same, by the grace of God."

"And she doesn't know about this Nancy girl?"

"No. She told me in so many words that it would hurt her pride to think I had ever thought of leaving her."

"Damn her pride. Cicely is horribly spoilt."

"That's her privilege, sir. Let her think she wrecks me. Having no conscience whatever, she finds a certain satisfaction, a certain gesture, in robbing me, as she calls it, for her friendless young man. If Nancy stoops to console me later, Cicely will thank her very prettily. She's fond of me, you know—in her way."

"Is she!" said Mortimer dryly.

"And then of course there's bound to be a bit of a mess about all this. Well, that's Cicely's affair—and mine. They're off to

Switzerland, and what-not. Naturally, I want to keep Nancy out of the picture until that's settled. Cicely can take her own medicine. She's asking for it. But Nancy's only a kid."

"If it wasn't for the Nancy girl you'd be fighting like hell for the Colonial Office," said Mortimer gloomily.

"If it wasn't for Nancy, sir, I could dodder comfortably into my grave via the said Colonial Office. But as Cicely observed of herself just now, *I'm not dead yet.* And remarkable as it seems to me when I stop to think of it, Nancy not only exists too, but she has fallen in love with me into the bargain. I don't defend her taste, but there it is. And I must confess—I must regretfully confess to you, sir, that in view of all this, the Colonial Office lacks charm."

"It's not as young as your Nancy, I'll admit."

"I suppose you're implying that her youthful vision is dazzled by my age and eminence. The only answer to that, if you'll allow me, to quote you, sir, is *Rot!*"

"That wasn't quite what I meant."

"Well, then, you give me a year, possibly more, to lose her to some younger man, is that

it? I still think you're wrong. But even if it were so—what a year!"

"Think, Charles—if it were so, what then? Would you crawl back into the House and inconspicuously die there, in the back benches?"

"What a morbid sort of mind you've got, sir!" said Charles with an artless air of discovery.

"I want an answer—a sensible answer from a responsible M.P.!"

"Very well, how's this one? I'll take up golf in a big way—I'll grow roses for flower-shows—I'll raise Angora rabbits—or I'll sit down and write my memoirs to pass the time, but I'll never see the inside of the House again! I've played safe all my life, sir—for the sake of that blessed House! I've gone heart hungry and imperilled my digestion and my sense of humor, in its name. I've endured Cicely's caprices and held her to social duties which she loathed, and made us both pretty wretched at times—all for the sake of the thing I'm chucking away now without a qualm. And why did I bother with it? Not for position, not for swank, not for power—"

"Well, why?"

"Because it was fun," said Charles simply.

"Fun?"

"*Fun,* to face those solemn rows of Opposition benches and hammer them till they squirmed! The chortling glee there is in chivvying sedate old coves from Manchester till their white hair curls—and pitching into ambitious youngsters till they got red and noisy! Not the applause, but the exercise of my worthless wits which wins the applause! The game, sir, the game, with the lid off! Any navvy down at Wapping would know what I mean—any navvy, bending his mighty muscles to a weight that would never budge to our combined efforts—he knows the same satisfaction out of handling it alone that I got out of feeling the unwilling, intangible *give* in those benches when I've been on my feet for an hour!"

"Charles, you're a romanticist," accused the Prime Minister unhappily.

"I never said I wasn't."

"I thought they'd all died off. You ought to be in a museum."

"No, I think the zoo, sir! As a matter of fact I know another one. That brother of mine—Cicely's brother, that is——"

"Mmmmm—nice boy. Got a head on him."

"Would he be any good to you, sir? He's badly bitten."

"Politics, eh? I thought so."

"He wants to grow up like father," said Charles, tapping his own chest. "I thought if you could find any use for him——"

"I'll speak to Kennedy. They're looking for somebody."

"That's very good of you, sir. He'll shape."

"Doubtless," agreed Mortimer, without enthusiasm.

Twenty years ago, when old Kingswake first spoke to him of a fellow named Charles Gordon, those had been the words then too. *He'll shape,* said Kingswake. Well, so he had. And twenty years hence, when Mortimer was cosy in his grave, doubtless this Johnny Woodville would have got himself into a hole because of a girl who probably wasn't born yet. Women. You couldn't trust them. They'd do in any man. And Mortimer, who had tried to show them their place by never marrying one of them, reaped most of the disaster and none of the fun. Charles had all the luck—and two such pretty women, too, for after all the girl was taking in a fresh, clean way. Himself, Mortimer preferred the Cicely type, all jasmine scent and things that trail in the evening—he was convinced, in a spasm of clairvoyance, that the Nancy girl wore pyja-

mas to bed, and his glance rested on Charles with momentary compassion. But Charles had tried the other thing and found it wanting. Mortimer was at a loss to account for this. Surely one could have managed fairly well, with a Cicely——?

"So now you're going to make speeches to Nancy till you die," he grumbled.

"I've finished with speeches, sir. You've always said yourself that a man had to have a game to play, or shrivel up. For years politics have been my game, because so far as I knew there wasn't a better one. But I've got a better one now."

"Marriage?" doubted Mortimer.

Charles shook his head with diffidence. He had no word for it, the thing he and Nancy could make of life together. Just—a better game. He could think of nothing else to call it.

"I have often felt a lamentable inadequacy about the English language, sir," he remarked after a moment. "I think—most of all it needs a new word for Nancy. There's an overworked, anæmic, manhandled collection of letters which is pronounced—love. Well, that's not it. That's not what she means to me, any more than marriage spells the game we want

to play together. I don't know if I make myself clear——?"

There was a silence.

"You've hit the weak spot in my argument as usual—and I suppose you're feeling your customary satisfaction at sheepherding." Mortimer's smile went a little awry. "You've found the inevitable flaw in my thesis—which is the damnable loneliness of a careful life. I don't know why it is, but something always seems to have to come up by the roots before we can have what we think we want worst in this world. The Lord doesn't provide, Charles—the Lord is *not* a good provider. We have to chuck away our manners and grab. That's what Cicely's doing, I suppose—grabbing. It doesn't always look sporting—it upsets my plans and makes a beastly hash of your life——"

"No, I beg your pardon, sir, but it doesn't do that. It gives me something to go on with."

"All the same, Charles, remember old man Disraeli taking his last look round before he went into the rarefied atmosphere of the Lords. You'll miss chivvying the House now and then."

"Oh, bound to, I'm afraid. But on the whole," he grinned, "it's worth it."

"I'll never admit it, but you're right." Mortimer rose with a sigh, and began his aimless prowling. "I've led a very discreet sort of life, haven't I—all things considered, I've been serpent-wise. I set a practically prohibitive price on my personal peace of mind, and there haven't been many bids. I called it getting on with the thing I wanted to do. You see, I made speeches even to myself in the old days. Well, I never had a wife—and I never had a Nancy." His old eyes wrinkled to his smile. "And I'm Prime Minister." He set a hand on Charles' shoulder, briefly. "And there's not much in it!"

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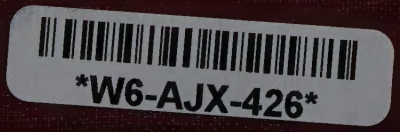
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